

Chapter 261

Recruitment

Both the seal and the rank-restriction on the astral space aperture had been removed by Jason's team. Clive had turned the world engineers that were meant to invade their world into magical batteries that opened a passageway back to it. This not only allowed the team to escape, but opened the astral space up to thorough exploration.

The first step was securing a foothold in a zone still steeped in danger by the rapid-spawning monsters, so Emir and his people moved in to secure what had formerly been the cultist camp. A number of Greenstone's local silver-rankers volunteering to assist. Aside from the potential wealth to be found, if they could forge a relationship with Emir, opportunities may well open up for the younger members of their families.

What they discovered was a truth that Emir, as a professional treasure hunter, already knew well: Exploring the unknown came with unknown danger. While Emir's people were making preparations and learning everything they could from Clive, Humphrey and the rest of their team, two local silver-rankers were left to watch the portal, along with a number of Emir's support staff. They were all found dead.

The deaths caused a furore in Greenstone's adventuring community. Aside from those who spent most of their time away from the city, like Thalia Mercer and Danielle Geller, the local silver-rankers were a risk-averse lot. Most were older, having slowly worked their way through bronze using monster cores.

Arabelle Remore led the investigation, and quickly reaching an unpleasant conclusion. She had seen the work of an energy vampire in the past and speaking with Jason's team quickly identified its most likely source. The Builder's last vessel, Thadwick Mercer, had never been found. Humphrey led her to the location in which they had left the soul imprisoning the sword, to discover that both were gone.

It was clear that the Builder had cut its losses, leaving the abandoned vessel to consume the loose soul and transforming into a potent threat. It had managed to approach the portal in secret and escape the astral space, stopping to feed on the other side. To help hunt the creature, Arabelle called her team mate Cal back to Greenstone.

"Have you ever tracked an energy vampire before?" Emir asked him, after Cal was briefed on their situation.

"I have," Cal said. "They can come into being a few different ways, with varying results. When they started out as a ghoul, they frequently wind up deficient, intellectually.

They remain creatures of hunger and instinct. If that's the case, it won't be hard to track. Bodies will start dropping fast, so we should check the villages around the lake."

"And if it is smart?"

"Then finding it will be rough. It'll know that we're after it, so it will most likely look to avoid causing trouble and get out of the region entirely. Fortunately, Greenstone is an isolated region with limited means of departure. We can investigate them while keeping an eye out for deaths. Even if it's laying low, an energy vampire still needs to feed."

The Mercer family compound was composed of five equidistant towers, interconnected by walkways. From the air above, the compound looked something akin to a magical circle. Thalia Mercer stood atop one of the towers, leaning on the stone balustrade as she looked out over the city.

The fortunes of her family had not been great in recent times. The defection of Thadwick had been crippling in numerous ways. The family's reputation had been savaged and Thadwick's insight into the Mercer family operations had led to a series of costly raids on their interests by the Builder cult. If not for their connection to the Duke and taking the lead in the purge of the cult from the city, the results could have been catastrophic. Even so, it would likely be generations before the family fully recovered.

For Thalia herself, the worst part was the realisation of just how badly she had failed her son. She had taken Cassandra to teach her the ways of an adventurer, while her husband had groomed their son to take over the family's local interests. She had known he was a spoiled boy, but only discovered the degree to which her neglect had harmed him when it was too late.

Her husband's shortcomings were not a mystery to her. There was a reason his younger brother had been named heir to the Dukedom, while Beaufort had been married off for political gain. She should never have had let him have full control over their son's upbringing, but it had allowed her to take their daughter to see a larger world.

Her neglect had allowed her husband to impress upon Thadwick his importance, without ever tempering it with responsibility. Now she wondered if there was any of her son left. First, she had been told of his fate as vessel for the Builder. Now he was some kind of vampiric monster.

"Do you even still exist, my little boy?" she whispered to herself.

"He does not," a voice behind her said and she whirled around.

She hadn't sensed the presence behind her and still couldn't, even looking right at him. Her aura and magic senses told her there was nothing there, but her eyes saw the

face of her son. He looked strong and healthy but she looked into his eyes and did not see Thadwick behind them.

“You’re not my son,” she said.

“No,” the energy vampire said.

“Then who are you?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Your son was the soil from which I grew. I know the things he knew, but those memories are not mine. I remember his thoughts, yet they make no sense. The things he did are not things I would do. The things he said are not things I would say.”

“What does that even mean?” Thalia asked.

“Your son is gone,” the vampire said. “I am what’s left.”

“They told me that you’re a monster,” she said. “Did you come to kill me?”

“No,” the vampire said, “although I have killed. I’m trying to understand who I am. What I am. Your son’s memories are the only guide I have, but I cannot understand the feelings and events that I remember. Your son hurt the things he loved. Turned against the family that gave him everything. Abandoned the friends who worked so hard to help and protect him.”

Tears crawled down Thalia’s face. Despite wearing her son’s face, this thing looked nothing like him.

“I failed him,” she said. “I should have helped him. Guided him.”

“Will you help me?” the vampire asked. It sounded so vulnerable, like a lost child.

“No,” she said, steeling herself. She squared her shoulders and wiped the tears from her face on the back of her arm. “The only thing left that I can do for my son is to destroy the thing that he has become.”

Thalia erupted forward in a blur, only to be stopped short, her fist caught in the vampire’s hand. He casually flung her from the tower rooftop to plunge toward the ground below. He knew that it would not harm her.

“I’m sorry mother,” it whispered.

The former cultist camp in the astral space had been left in shambles by the battle that had taken place. The blood of cultists and the converted stained the ground, their dead bodies scattered amongst the broken remains of constructs. The monster blood that had drenched the place had all evaporated into rainbow smoke. Buildings made with stone-shaping powers had been broken and shattered, crates of supplies left ruined and spoiled.

After the death of the silver-rankers, the Adventure Society stepped in, taking over from Emir's people and heavily securing both sides of the portal arch. Emir wasn't boxed out, still free to explore the astral space, but the Adventure Society's action helped stabilise things after the loss of the silver-rankers. Ever since the disastrous expedition into the desert astral space, the families of Greenstone had been very wary of losses.

After being cleared out, the cultist camp had been repurposed as a base of operations for a thorough exploration of the astral space. The lowest floors of the tower had space for occupation and Clive was sitting in a room he had claimed, books splayed out on tables as he moved from one to the other, scribbling notes in a book.

Clive was kept busy organising the materials being salvaged that had belonged to the Builder's ritualists. All the supplies, books, notes and tools that were found were piled up around him. The camp around the tower had been largely trashed, but the original walled fortress where the cultists first arrived was more intact. A lot of the ritualists' paraphernalia discovered there remained undamaged and Clive was working to try and better understand the magic the Builder cult used.

If he could better understand the process of turning someone into a vessel, he might be able to find useful information for hunting the energy vampire. The books Knowledge gave to Jason, along with all the notes Clive had taken on them, would have been excellent supplemental material, but they were lost along with Jason.

More important to Clive than the vampire was something he was desperately looking for in the cultist material but found not so much as a clue to. Engrossed in his work, he didn't notice a beautiful young woman in the robes of a Knowledge priestess appeared at the open door.

"You won't find it," Gabrielle told Clive, who looked up at the intrusion.

"Acolyte Pellin," he said. His hair was unruly, his face covered in stubble. There were thick bags under his eyes.

"You need to sleep, Mr Standish."

Clive narrowed his eyes at the priestess.

"You said I wouldn't find it."

"Yes."

"Then you know what I'm looking for."

"Yes."

"Then tell me."

"I can tell you a part," she said, offering a sad smile that mixed sympathy and apology. "There is only so much my Lady will allow me to say."

“Then say it,” Clive said, too tired for niceties. “What was that heat coming out of Jason? Did the Builder do something to his soul?”

“My Lady does not wish to tell you what that fire is. She will allow me to say that it was not the Builder’s doing. Jason Asano’s soul was vouchsafed upon his death and sent on its way. The Builder cannot touch it.”

“Your goddess is certain? We inquired with the goddess of Death and she didn’t know. This place does not fall under the eyes of our gods.”

“My goddess is certain,” Gabrielle said. “Asano’s soul is exactly where it is meant to be.”

Clive deflated like a balloon, letting out a long, slow breath. He said nothing for a long time as Gabrielle waited patiently.

“Thank you,” he said finally. “And thank your goddess. It’s been playing on all of our minds.”

“Normally she would not speak on it,” Gabrielle said. “The fate of the dead is not the business of the living. Under the circumstances, she felt it was best to alleviate your concerns.”

Clive pushed himself wearily up from the wooden stool he was sitting on and onto his feet.

“I need to go tell the others,” he said.

“I have something for you first,” Gabrielle said. “You have fought the Builder and you will again.”

“You’re damn right.”

Gabrielle slid a satchel off of her should and rested it on the desk.

“This dimensional bag has copies of all the books my Lady gave to Jason and all the notes you took while studying them. She wants you to have them, for the fights to come.”

Clive looked at the satchel, then picked it up and slung it over his own shoulder.

“Thank you,” she said, “and thank your goddess for me.”

He hurried past her and out of the room.

Gabrielle exited the astral space through the portal arch, arriving back in her own world. Since the deaths at the hands of the energy vampire, the security around the portal arch was much tighter. Anti-portal barriers had been set up, inhibiting teleportation into or out of the underwater dome. Visitors were required to physically return to the lake surface before they could teleport away or travel overland back to the city.

Gabrielle stepped onto one of the bubble platforms that had been set up to deliver people to and from the surface. It moved out of the dome, maintaining a bubble of air as it ascended through the water.

"It's done," she said.

"I know," Knowledge's comforting voice spoke directly into her mind. "You've done well, but you are uncertain that this is the right approach."

"Why not tell them?"

"Because this is not a time for comfort," Knowledge said. "This is a time for war. Asano's death will drive his friends to be more dedicated weapons against the Builder."

"I think they would have been motivated even without wanting to avenge him."

"But now they are not just motivated. They are zealous. In any case, Asano may never return."

"But you think he will," Gabrielle said.

"Yes."

"If he does, I don't think he'll be happy that you let his friends think he was still dead."

"If he returns, he will have greater concerns than that. His friends are more effective weapons believing he is dead and gone. It is objectively better for them to think that."

"I can't help wondering if this is one of the times that people aren't going to react the way you think they will," Gabrielle said reluctantly. "I don't think objective results are what Asano is going to value."

Humphrey and Sophie rose up through Emir's cloud palace on the elevating platform, arriving in his private study. It was on top of one of the palace towers, under a shimmering dome of translucent mist. The floor was riddled with water pools, from which lush green plants were growing. There were more than the last time Humphrey visited the space, which had become more of a rooftop garden than a study.

Emir was behind a desk, glancing up from the papers he was reading to wave in front of him. A pair of cloud chairs rose up from the floor. Humphrey and Sophie moved over and sat down as Emir put his papers into a folder, then looked up with a smile.

"How are you both doing?" he asked gently.

"Jason's memorial is done," Humphrey said. "We're ready to take the fight back to the Builder."

"Right back," Sophie agreed. "We're ready to taste cultist blood."

“Easier said than done,” Emir said. “The Adventure Society is confident, now, that the cult activity in this region is finished. They put everything they had into claiming the last astral space. The church of Purity as well.”

“We don’t mind travelling to find them,” Humphrey said.

“It hasn’t reached the point of open fighting,” Emir said. “The cult is still being clandestine in their activities, sneaking into astral spaces. Only when we catch them at it does it turn to fighting, but at least we’re more prepared than the expedition here.”

“Maybe we should go after the church of Purity,” Sophie said.

“The church of Purity maintain that only a rogue faction are responsible for collaboration, and that they are rooting them out themselves.”

“That’s crap,” Sophie said.

“I agree, and we’re not alone,” Emir said. “It’s a delicate issue, though. For the moment, it’s best to let the other churches pressure and investigate them.”

“You have something you want us to do,” Humphrey said. “We’re not looking to be kept busy. We want to make a difference.”

“What I have in mind isn’t busywork,” Emir said. “The world still has problems that won’t stop and wait for us to handle the Builder.”

“What do you have in mind?” Humphrey asked.

“Things carried on during your time in the astral space. The monster surge still hasn’t happened. We’ve been getting precursor signs for most of a year, now, but it still hasn’t happened.”

“So I’ve heard,” Humphrey said. “A number of my family’s bronze-rankers have crossed into silver from fighting the regular stream of silver-rank monsters.”

“There have been other developments as well,” Emir said. “Did Jason ever tell you about what he learned when he claimed the Reaper’s scythe?”

“All he told me,” Humphrey said, “was that there was some kind of club and the first rule was not talking about it. I’m pretty sure he was doing that thing where... well, you know the thing.”

Emir and Sophie both nodded.

“What he learned,” Emir said, “and the thing he was told not to tell, was that the Order of the Reaper were not, as previously believed, wiped out.”

“That’s not much of a revelation,” Humphrey said. “I think everyone suspected that.”

“But only those who became certain of it were granted access to the final room of the test to have their thoughts confirmed. They each received various prizes that came with the confirmation – the scythe, in Jason’s case – and an admonition to tell no one.”

“That’s stupid,” Sophie said. “Why bother to confirm it, then turn around and tell them to keep their mouths shut? There’s no way that doesn’t leak.”

“But what if that was the point?” Emir asked. “One of the few who made it to that last room died and had her entire contingent wiped out along with her. It happened right in the middle of the lakeside camp, without anyone around them noticing. Later investigation discovered that she the one who leaked the secret.”

“If the secret was already out there, why kill them?” Humphrey asked. “That just brings more attention to it.”

“Again,” Emir said. “What if that is the point? In the time you’ve been away, there have been signs cropping up all over the world that the Order of Reaper is ready to reclaim their position in the shadows. The events here seem to be part of a much larger campaign to make the order’s return an open secret.”

“Does that mean that the person who hired you to open up the astral space is a part of the Order?” Sophie asked.

“That was my suspicion as well,” Emir said. “I have since been convinced otherwise. My client, it seems, was used as a tool by the Order. Any guesses on how a diamond-ranker feels about being someone else’s tool?”

“Ready to kill some people?” Sophie asked.

“Ready to kill some people,” Emir confirmed. “I’m washing my hands of the astral space as the Adventure Society moves in to explore it. They’ve brought in more high-rankers, given the locals are of limited value. My client has asked me to continue my investigation of the Order of the Reaper, and I would like your team to help me.”

“Not interested,” Sophie said. “If some old order of assassins wants to run around playing politics, I’m happy to let them. It’s the Builder that I want.”

“All their known areas of operation have a higher level of magic than here,” Emir warned. “That means higher-ranked adventurers, which means that if you go there, you’ll be told to shut up and do what you’re told. Given that Jason Asano had such a large hand in your training, I don’t imagine those are skills you picked up.”

“So I should just give it up?” Sophie asked combatively.

“No,” Emir said. “I suggest you take a longer view. I doubt the Order of the Reaper is choosing now to make their appearance by accident. It seems likely that they are going to try and leverage action against the Builder to re-establish themselves in the eyes of the world’s various authorities.”

“You’re saying that if we go after the Reaper’s order, we’re likely to stumble into the Builder’s cult,” Humphrey said.

“Honestly, that is just postulation on my part,” Emir said. “I think the chances are good, though.”

“Why us?” Humphrey asked. “Aside from the personal connection, what do we have to offer you, when you have no shortage of silver-rankers, let alone bronze.”

“To be frank, I don’t need you, Humphrey,” Emir said, then turned to look directly at Sophie. “I need you, Sophie. Most of what we’ve managed to learn about the Order of the Reaper, we’re fairly certain that the Order itself has put in our path. You, Sophie, are the strongest lead we have on the contemporary activities of the Order of the Reaper that I’m fairly confident didn’t come from the order itself.”

“You’re talking about the fighting style my father taught me,” Sophie said.

“Yes,” Emir said. “I want to explore your past and see what we find.”

“I’d rather just go right after the Builder,” she said. “The Builder is going to pay for Jason.”

“I understand your feelings,” Emir said. “As I said, there are only so many opportunities to go after the Builder directly. Even if you do agree to help me, I think you’ll get your chance anyway, courtesy of Clive.”

In the astral space tower, Clive was at work combining what had been left by the cultists with what Gabrielle had delivered.

“Mr Standish?”

Clive turned to see a man and a woman in the doorway. They were wearing Magic Society robes and both radiated silver-rank auras.

“You’ve come for the cultists’ material?” Clive asked.

“We have,” the woman said. “We’ve also come for you.”

“For me?” Clive asked. “I’m not a Magic Society official anymore. I’m just a regular member; I’ve gone full-time adventurer.”

“We are aware,” the woman said. “Let me introduce myself. My name is Lorelei Grantham and I’m a researcher assigned to work with the Adventure Society’s Continental Council. As we’ve been collating information about the Builder cult’s activities, we realised that a small, provincial city was making discoveries about the cult just as quickly as the major centres. When we looked into it, we discovered that you were crucial in many of these discoveries, but had already entered this astral space to take the fight to the Builder.”

“I’m an adventurer,” Clive said. “We fight the bad guys.”

“That’s an odd turn of phrase,” the man said.

“I had a friend who was prone to odd turns of phrase,” Clive said. “He died stopping the Builder from using this astral space as a weapon.”

Clive gestured at the materials stacked up around him.

“I’m still putting it together,” he said, “but I’m certain that if the Builder’s world engineers had been activated and used to invade, the destructiveness of their arrival would have dwarfed the results of simply claiming an astral space. The destruction may well have reached Greenstone, which is hundreds of kilometres away.”

“Do you know how long the portal will remain stable?” Lorelei asked.

“The portals around the edge of the city didn’t activate,” Clive said. “I thought they would, but I was very much improvising, so I was bound to get things wrong. The portal arch we transplanted to this tower will probably hold up for another few weeks before becoming unstable and collapsing. I think the Adventure Society intends to use it as a place to help people rank-up until then.”

“That’s my understanding, yes,” Lorelei said. “Mr Standish, I’ve been looking at your record with the Magic Society. You’ve been wasted here. I’d like you to come work for me at the Continental Council. If you want to avenge your friend, that will put you at the forefront of resisting the Builder’s efforts.”

“I have a team,” Clive said. “I’m not going to leave them to go off and do research.”

“We anticipate that there will be a goodly amount of fieldwork involved,” Lorelei said. “That is one of many reasons that make you so appealing. Your skill set and your team will be ideally suited to acting against the cult directly, as needed. Mr Emir Bahadir has a use for your team, but we have made arrangements to portal them in should you have a need to go into the field.”

“Is it true that you use combat rituals?” the man asked.

“Dennis,” Lorelei scolded.

“It’s really rare,” Dennis said.

Clive’s left hand flashed, drawing out a simple diagram in the air. He drew the wand strapped to his hip and jammed it into the diagram, which lit up brightly as it affixed itself to the tip. Clive fired the wand at the pair, which showered them in harmless, rainbow sparks. The whole process happened in the time it took to draw a breath.

“Yes,” Clive said. “I use combat rituals.”