

Chapter 234

Crossing the Threshold

The team waited for the sound of grinding stone that would signal another wave of combat, but the room was as silent as Neil, under Jason's baleful glare.

"I think we're clear," Humphrey said, finally.

The team stopped to rest in the zone of clean air Sophie's power had finishing clearing out, while the poison mist in the rest of the room slowly dispersed. As the haze disappeared, it revealed a horror show of dead creatures piled around the broken remains of the constructs they had destroyed earlier.

Neil tried looting the enemies, but while the constructs yielded a few crafting materials, the creatures yielded nothing. They also didn't disappear into rainbow smoke, showing them to not be monsters, but real creatures.

"These things have been sealed away for who knows how long," Neil said. "Kind of like those priests that Jason set loose."

"My interface called them Tartarian Brutes," Jason said. "The constructs were Tartarian Golems. Does that mean something to anyone?"

All eyes turned to Clive, who shook his head.

"In my world," Jason said, "there's a myth about a realm called Tartarus. It's a prison realm."

"We do seem to be in a prison," Belinda said. "It makes me curious about what's behind these doors."

While Neil had been looting, Clive had been examining the doors. He started drawing magic diagrams on them in golden lines with his ritual power. Jason noted that, unlike the attempts of the adventurers that came before, they were being placed in the middle of the doors, rather than around the locks.

"You're not trying to crack the locks?" he asked Clive.

"Those are a decoy," Clive said. "A key tip for ritual magic – and life, really – is to not do the same thing as the people who died trying. Also, a twin-circle ritual is a very bad idea if you don't know what you're doing."

Clive completed the ritual, the two magical circles lighting up on the door. The red light shining from underneath faded away and there was a pair of audible clicks from the locks. Clive dismissed his glowing ritual circles with a wave of his hands and pushed on the doors, swinging them open.

Beyond was a circular chamber with a vaulted ceiling and only one feature. In the middle of the room was a stone plinth, on which was what looked like a solid block of crystal encasing a sword. Around the block of crystal was a sphere of shimmering light, the same gold, silver and blue produced by Jason's transcendent damage powers.

The sword in the block was elaborately crafted into a sinister form. The blade was some kind of black metal, engraved with glowing red runes down its length. The hilt was constructed of some manner of red crystal and black stone, like ruby and onyx. The grip had sharp thorns, meaning that anyone who grasped it would be stabbing their own hand.

"It kind of looks like Jason's dagger," Neil said. Jason conjured his dagger into his hand, holding up for the group to compare. Jason's dagger was likewise an ornate object of black obsidian and red crystal.

"You're not wrong," Jason said. "It has to be coincidence, though right? I mean, if you're making a sweet-looking red and black bladed weapon, they're all going to end up with a certain level of similarity."

"Do those runes on the blade mean anything?" Sophie asked. Jason and Clive both had translation powers, so they looked closer.

"They don't say anything coherent," Jason said. "They just represent various concepts."

"Not ideal concepts, either," Clive added. "Soul. Power. Hunger. Life. Feast."

"That does sound pretty bad," Neil said. "As in, Jason's powers bad."

"Hey..."

"I'm more interested in that energy around it," Clive said. "It seems very strange to both aura and magical senses."

"It looks like Jason's dissolve people into nothing powers," Sophie said. "I'm not going near it."

"Agreed," Neil said.

Jason turned his attention to the shimmering light, slowly moving closer.

"Be careful," Humphrey warned, but Jason instead extended a hand toward the light.

"Jason, you should give me time to examine that before doing anything rash," Clive said.

Jason ignored them, having felt something familiar about the energy. As his fingertips came in contact with it, a bolt of sensation rocketed through his body and he yanked his arm back, like it had been shocked. He stumbled back a couple of steps before righting himself.

“It’s a soul,” Jason said, his voice haunted. “This light is a disembodied soul, somehow held here.”

“Are you sure?” Clive asked.

“Completely.”

Clive scratched his head as he looked at the light in confusion.

“That shouldn’t even be possible.”

“I’m increasingly convinced that impossible isn’t a thing,” Jason said.

“So, someone has turned an actual, living soul into a box?” Humphrey asked. “Isn’t that a lot to keep people away from a sword?”

“It isn’t trying to keep things out,” Jason said. “It’s trying to keep something in.”

“Are you sure?” Clive said. “Even with enhanced aura senses, it’s like there’s something obscuring it.”

“You can touch it, if you like,” Jason said. “I wouldn’t advise it, though. It’s much higher rank than we are. At least gold, and possibly even diamond. Just coming into contact with it had quite the spiritual kick, but its purpose was immediately clear. Everything it is has been directed to a singular intent: keeping this sword exactly where it is.”

“I’m going to touch it,” Clive said.

“Just be warned,” Jason said. “It’s going to kick you right in the soul.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” Humphrey suggested.

“I have to,” Clive said. “Call it a spirit of enquiry. I’d rather go through whatever punch-back it will give me than live my life knowing I had the chance to experience something so rare and unique, but didn’t have the courage.”

Clive reached out his hand and, after a brief moment of hesitation, touched the light. The breath shot out of him and he toppled like a tree, falling to the ground, unconscious. Neil quickly dropped to one knee to examine him.

“He’s fine,” Neil quickly said. “He just had a jolt to the system, causing some soul-body dysphoria. Best to let it settle than try and forcibly wake him up.”

“That soul-body thing sounds bad,” Sophie said.

“On a regular person it would be,” Neil said as he pulled a pillow from his dimensional satchel and placed it under Clive’s head. “For an essence user, it’s kind of like holding your breath for too long and passing out. He’s going to wake up with a fierce headache, but nothing more than that.”

The team gathered around Clive, looking down at him with concern.

“Really, he’ll be fine,” Neil said. “It won’t take him long to wake up.”

“Alright,” Belinda said. “I guess we decide what to do about this sword while we wait.”

“We don’t do anything,” Jason said. “Someone or something went to considerable effort to contain it here. All that stuff we fought in the cell block was little more than a no trespassing sign compared to the power involved with this. If someone went to the trouble of doing this to a person’s soul, just to keep this thing locked up, I don’t think letting it loose is a good idea. Even assuming we can figure out how.”

“So, after all the fighting we did to get here, you just want to walk away?” Belinda asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “That’s exactly what I want to do.”

“I’m willing to take Jason’s advice on that,” Humphrey said. “Sophie, Neil?”

“Oh, I was happy to leave it there when I saw that fact that the handle stabs you,” Neil said. “That tells you all you need to know about the kind of weapon it is.”

“It’s not as if we’re even looking for a sword,” Sophie said. “You conjure yours, Humphrey, and you’re not giving up the one Gary made, right Asano?”

“Exactly right,” Jason said.

“That just leaves you, Lindy,” Sophie said. “It might not hurt to have some good equipment for your turn into a warrior power.”

“No thanks,” Belinda said. “I’ll stick with weapons that only stab the other guy.”

Clive groaned loudly as he gained consciousness. He groggily sat up, gripped his head in his hands and let out another coughing groan. Neil dropped back down to examine him.

“How do you feel?” Neil asked.

“Like someone dropped a sailing ship on me,” Clive said, looking past Neil to Jason.

“How did you avoid that thing hitting your soul like a hammer?” Clive asked.

“I didn’t,” Jason said. “I did warn you.”

“I wish I had your resilience of soul,” Clive said.

“No,” Jason said flatly. “You don’t.”

“We’ve decided to leave the sword where it is,” Humphrey said to Clive. “Unless you’re looking to reopen the debate.”

“No,” Clive said, shaking his head and then wincing at the pain it brought. “I felt that soul. What it went through to put that thing there and keep it there. I’m not even sure we could get that sword out, but I am very sure that we shouldn’t.”

Neil and Jason were meditating outside where the cloud house had been set up. They were both anticipating an ascension to bronze-rank after the battle in the cell block

and didn't want to make a mess inside. The cloud house would be able to clear it up, but doing so would just accelerate the rate at which it would consume the supply of crystal wash Jason had fed into it. It had been a huge amount and should be sufficient for years, but there was no point accelerating the consumption when it wasn't necessary.

Neil's summoning power was his last remaining iron-rank ability. The golem had fought like a champion in their most recent conflict, so no one was surprised when Neil crossed the threshold into bronze. He wandered out from the secluded bit of ruin where he had finished his advancement, having washed himself down with a bottle of crystal wash after purging all the muck from his body in the transition.

He had stripped down to his underwear, so his waiting teammates could see that his blocky, weight-lifter physique had clearly changed to one of more sleek, yet still built-up muscle. It had also made his hair fall out and his fingernails grow strangely long. Jason helped remedy those minor issues with grooming scissors and some of Jory's hair growth cream.

Jason's change did not come that day, but Humphrey designated a day for rest. It was something they had done around once a week, taking a break from the otherwise unrelenting schedule of training and combat. They had killed more monsters than it was worth bothering to count, although they had been counting the flesh abominations. They had found and destroyed forty-one of the abominations thus far, which Shade's numbers put at around a tenth of the city's total.

Shade's familiar power advanced ahead of Gordon's, the shadow Jason's most constant companion. Jason had come to rely on his shadowy presence, available even when an apocalypse monster or an interdimensional reality assassin were socially inappropriate.

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- All [Dark Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 0].
 - Linked attribute [Speed] has increased from [Iron 9] to [Bronze 0].
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Jason's power attribute had reached bronze over the course of their time in the astral space, taking his strength officially beyond what any normal human was capable of. It was the transition of his speed attribute that really made him feel like he had truly transformed, however. It affected not just his ability to run fast, but his reflexes, agility, dexterity and proprioception.

His newly ascended speed attribute also combined with his power attribute to make him capable of incredible feats. When he really should have gone back to meditation, his

team found him doing somersaults on the spot and climbing up ruins by jumping from wall to wall.

“I feel like a video game character!”

“No one knows what that means,” Sophie said.

“You’ve been able to move like this for as long as I’ve known you,” Jason told her.

“How are you not constantly running around and giggling like an idiot?”

“You should have seen her when she was younger,” Belinda confided, getting a glare from Sophie.

Jason finally settled down and resumed his meditation, after which it did not take long before Gordon’s power likewise crossed the line.

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- All [Doom Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 0].
 - Linked attribute [Spirit] has increased from [Iron 9] to [Bronze 0].

 - Progress to bronze rank: 100% (4/4 essences complete).

 - All your attributes have reached bronze rank.

 - You have reached bronze rank.
 - You have gained resistance to iron-rank and lower damage sources and effects.
 - The potency of your aura has increased.
 - Your aura senses have improved.

 - Progress to silver rank: 00%.
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Jason’s transition from iron to bronze rank was much less violent than from normal to iron. That time, his newly created body had been composed of what Clive called trash magic, while his iron-rank one was closer to an ideal state for his rank. It still purged a large quantity of black, stinking biomass, however, that he washed off with crystal wash.

He trimmed his suddenly grown nails and regrew his hair with the cream, leaving his beard to grow back on its own. Humphrey and Clive had both grown beards during their time in the astral space, likewise losing them during their rank-ups. Neil, being an elf, had never grown more than a light scruff that Jason found enviably appealing.

Jason really did feel transformed. He was a new man and he felt it. Just moving around in his bronze-rank body felt different. His spirit attribute reaching bronze also had a big impact as it increased not just the sixth sense that detected auras but took his other five senses beyond the bounds of human potential. The world was suddenly alive with a nuance of colour like nothing he had experienced. He could pick out scents like he was cataloguing them and his hearing could pick out the world around him almost as well as

his vision. He could feel the air on his skin, taste it on his tongue. It was as if the world had transformed with him.

“Good, right?” Humphrey asked with a smile as he found Jason looking into the distance with a goofy grin.

“Oh, yeah.”

“We can handle monsters, or equivalent, of higher rank than us in large numbers, now,” Humphrey said. “Remember those teams we saw at the mirage arena in Jayapura? We can stand shoulder to shoulder with any of them, now.”

“Some people might think that means we can relax a little,” Jason asked. “Something tells me that you think it means we have to train even harder.”

“I can confidently say that we’re at an elite level for our rank,” Humphrey said. “That’s not such a big deal at iron rank, though. If we’re going to say the same at bronze and silver, we need to start the work now.”

“You know, Humphrey, the parents of every girlfriend you ever have are going to love you.”

“What do they think of you?” Humphrey asked.

“I haven’t gotten that far too many times,” Jason said. “There was my first girlfriend, whose parents liked my brother more. Which worked out, in the end. Everyone between her and Cassandra was more casual. Thalia Mercer liked me. Her husband, not so much, I think. The thing with Thadwick, you know.”

“I was always uneasy about Gabrielle’s parents,” Humphrey said. “Religious is good, but some people take it to a point that it gets a little unnerving.”

“Putting aside the religious being good thing, I know what you mean,” Jason said. “You get those really religious people with that weird intensity, you know?”

“Oh yeah,” Humphrey said. “I mean, the goddess of knowledge. It should be a fairly relaxed group, right? They kept asking me what I was reading. They did not like hearing that I didn’t have a lot of time to read with all the training. Speaking of which, we will be getting back to it. A few days to let you and Neil get a feel for your new power level. Then we’ll go after the blood weaver and see what we can find from what’s left of the cultists.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “I have some stuff to do before that, though. Growth items, familiar summoning. Basically, a bunch of rituals. Neil has his growth items, too.”

“We can take tomorrow,” Humphrey said. “After that, though, it’s back to work.”