

## Chapter 247

### The True Danger

Archbishop Hendren had apparently put his barrier up in time to completely shield the three, who were barely even dirty after having had a building dropped on them. The dome flickered out of existence; anyone with magic senses could detect that huge amounts of mana had been poured into it. This was of limited help to the team, as one of the many problems in facing a silver-ranker was that they had no shortage of mana to spend.

Anisa's aura, like Sophie's, cleared the air around her, the archbishop and Timos. As they stepped forward and the two auras overlapped, suddenly the air between them was cleared.

"Clever," Hendren said. "Luring us into a trap. We were rushing to catch you before you left the area and weren't as cautious as we should have been."

"You didn't have to survive to tell us that," Jason said. "Your immediate death would have been compliment enough."

"Cleverness will only get you so far," Hendren said. "It will always falter in the face of true power."

"That's just what clever people have tricked you into thinking," Jason said. "Because they're, you know, clever."

"Don't spare him words," Anisa said. "He deserves only death."

"Anisa, if deserve had anything to do with what we get in life," Jason said, "A meteor would have landed on your head years ago. You've had it out for me from the day we met and I'm thinking it's time you and I put this thing to bed, one way or another. You and me, purification versus affliction. Are you willing to pit the power of your god against the darkness in the heart of man? The man being me. Or the darkness is me; I shouldn't have used a metaphor. Me stab-stab, you heal-heal. What do you say?"

"I will take pleasure in shutting that mouth for good," she said.

Jason leapt forward, Anisa's gaze focused on him as orbs of light manifested around he body. Then, beside her, when Hendren called out a warning.

"Behind you!"

Hendren's silver-rank senses had noticed the approach of Stash in the form of a rodent climbing over the rubble. Even as Hendren yelled, Stash was taking the form of one of the monsters they had encountered during their time in the astral space. His new form had the body of a rhino and the legs of a mountain goat, but no neck or head at all. The

front of his body was taken up entirely by a mouth ringed with teeth, with a pair of barbed, prehensile tongues.

Monster-Stash lunged at Anisa but Hendron shoved her out of the way, stepping into the space she occupied. Despite being much smaller and lighter than Sash's monstrous form, Stash was sent tumbling away with a loud, slapping backhand.

Anisa, meanwhile, had tumbled herself from where Hendren had shoved her out of the path. Sprawled on the uneven rubble, she looked up at the enemy to find not Jason, but Humphrey, propelled through the air with the power of a special attack.

The rapid-fire sequence of events happened over just a moment. It was a testament to the team's relentless practise. Week after week, day after day and hour after hour of fighting monsters together had turned them into a well-oiled machine. The improvised tactic had begun with Jason calling out Anisa.

The team knew that he was a poor match-up for the Purity priestess and his call for a singular confrontation was a signal to do the exact opposite. If he was drawing attention to himself instead of vanishing to seek out opportunities, it meant he was looking to create a distraction. While he was normally the dagger in the dark, Jason also liked to play waving right hand as the left hand struck.

The left hand, this case, was Humphrey. Humphrey directed Stash through their familiar bond, knowing that he would be detected and the silver-ranker would be quick enough to react, but have little time to make that reaction. Even if the archbishop had a quick-shield power like Neil's, Humphrey was betting on an instinctive reaction to push Anisa out of the way. Humphrey bet on that and was already moving, lunging for the spot he expected the priestess to be, rather than where she was at the moment he launched his special attack.

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#### Ability: [Flying Leap] (Wing)

- Special attack (combination, movement)
  - Cost: Low stamina.
  - Cooldown: 10 seconds.
  
  - Current rank: Bronze 4 (19%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Swift and powerful leap with some limited air control that can be combined with normal or special melee attacks. Physical damage from these attacks is increased.
  
  - Effect (bronze): All damage from melee special attacks combined with this ability is increased, regardless of damage type.
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Humphrey grew larger as he sailed through the air, courtesy of Neil's Giant's Might spell. He also brought his heavy sword down in an overhead smash as he leapt, his most powerful, Unstoppable Force attack. Enhanced by the leaping power, it fell on Anisa like divine judgement. Neil, lightning quick with his spells, managed a second spell before the attack landed, using Bolster to further enhance the attack.

Anisa quickly threw up a shield, even as her three orbs moved to intercept Humphrey's sword. There was a sound like shattering glass as they crumbled, one after another. With the triple enhancement of Neil's spells and Humphrey's combined special attacks, the Unstoppable Force power lived up to its name.

Bronze and silver ranks represented very different stages of advancement for an essence user. Silver was like a whole new world, where what was a danger to ordinary people were no longer a factor. Bronze rank was the first step beyond normal, mortal potential, but only a small one. Only at silver rank would Anisa have been able to survive having Humphrey's sword bury itself in her body.

Anisa had been something of a perfect weapon against Jason's powers, with abilities to inhibit his death by a thousand cuts style, both in protecting herself and cleansing afflictions. Jason had guessed as much long ago, which is why he had immediately signalled for his team to make the move.

Humphrey was the opposite of what she was best at, his potent, singular attacks relying not on repetition or sinister after-effects. The single, overwhelming attack was as dangerous to her as she was to Jason, which is why Humphrey was kicking her corpse off his sword just moments into the fight.

The archbishop snarled in rage, throwing a hand out that blasted Humphrey, even enlarged by Neil's spell, tumbling back. Jason, forgotten in the wake of Humphrey's attention grabbing assault, had positioned himself to strike at the distracted archbishop. Despite his rage, however, Hendren's reflexes were quick and he hadn't abandoned his attentiveness when surrounded by enemies.

Jason's dagger barely drew blood, while the backhand retaliation was far more powerful. Neil was once again on the ball, a shield appearing around Jason to negate the attack, buying Jason the moment he needed to back off.

Timos, through all this, read the situation and reacted immediately, in the exact opposite way to the archbishop. Rather than lunge into the attack, he activated two separate movement powers in quick succession as he fled, followed by a chameleon power that made his departing form hard to spot. Jason quickly cast a spell in his direction as a parting shot.

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### Ability: [Castigate] (Sin)

- Spell (curse, holy, tracking)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 4 (06%).
  
- Effect (iron): Burns a painful brand into the target, inflicting slight transcendent damage and the [Sin] and [Mark of Sin] conditions. The brand cannot be healed so long as the target retains any instances of [Sin].
  
- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration [Weight of Sin]. You gain the [Marshal of Judgement] boon.
  
- [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  
- [Mark of Sin] (affliction, holy): Prevents aura retraction. Cannot be cleansed while target retains any instances of [Sin] or [Legacy of Sin].
  
- [Weight of Sin] (affliction, holy): Target suffers transcendent damage when subjected to a holy boon, recovery, healing or cleansing effect.
  
- [Marshal of Judgement] (boon, tracking, holy): Know the distance and direction of anyone bearing a [Mark of Sin] placed by you. This effect lasts as long as any mark is still in place and cannot be negated.

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Unless Timos had an ability like Jason's to escape tracking effects, Jason would know where Timos was, roughly, until the cultist found a way to remove the afflictions. Most of Jason's afflictions had a lengthy duration, but Sin would never drop off until it was cleansed, meaning that Mark of Sin and Marshal of Judgement would likewise remain in effect perpetually. Timos showed no intention of doubling back, however, as Jason sensed him moving directly away from them at speed.

Jason and his team had seized the initiative with their powerful opening gambit, taking a dangerous enemy off the board. No fight against a silver-rank essence user could be that simple, however. Even alone, the threat Hendren represented was only marginally diminished by the loss of his bronze-rank companions. He had always been the true danger.

The team had also gone through a number of their more powerful abilities with their opening moves. Having them on cooldown and not immediately available again moved the momentum in Hendren's favour. He had used his near-indestructible dome ability, but was otherwise fully loaded with powers.

The furious archbishop conjured a staff into his hands, a wooden staff covered in runes. As Sophie moved in before he went after one of her less-resilient team members, he demonstrated that he was fully capable of using it to the full extent. He unleashed a dizzying array of spinning attacks, Sophie wildly moving to intercept them with her arms, legs and fists.

The air was full of dust from the freshly-demolished building, aside from the bubble of clean air created by Sophie's aura. The rubble underfoot made for unsteady footing, but neither Sophie nor the archbishop seemed troubled, dancing around one another as if they were on solid ground. Humphrey could not match the feat, so waited the few seconds for his leap attack to become available before once more hurling himself into the fray.

While it wasn't his Unstoppable Force attack, it was still startling to see the power of two of Humphrey's special attacks completely arrested by nothing more than an ordinary staff block, the silver-ranker not even staggered as his staff continued to spin dangerously as it went after both Sophie and Humphrey together.

Hendren was close to an exact rank above the bulk of the team, in the low-to-mid range of silver. He had no abilities that enhanced his speed or strength, but his silver-rank attributes still made him faster than Sophie and stronger than Humphrey. The margins weren't so large, but embodied in a single person, the result was easily the most formidable foe the team had ever encountered.

Hendren's martial skills, while highly trained, were not the match of Humphrey or Sophie, being more on the level of Jason. They were still more than dangerous when combined with his silver-rank strength and speed and a barrage of special attacks.

As a human, the archbishop had plenty of special attacks available. They mostly seemed to be of the moderate power, short cooldown variety, which allowed him to chain them into well-practiced sequences. He could extend the length of his staff, create a storm of illusionary jabs that still inflicted damage or seamlessly integrate magical blasts from his staff, even while using it as a melee weapon. As he executed attack after attack, hammering at Sophie and Humphrey, he was also able to adroitly navigate the uncertain footing.

While Hendren was no match for Danielle Geller or Thalia Mercer, he still towered above the kind of trashy silver-ranker that languished in Greenstone instead of seeking greater heights in the wider world. If Sophie and Humphrey were all he had to deal with, then he would have finished the fight already.

Humphrey and Neil both had their summons ready nearby and had called them in once the fighting started. Despite the continually worsening odds, the archbishop continued to fight off all comers with what looked like disheartening ease.

Clive's staff blasts were much less effective than normal as Hendren had the same Crystallise Mana power as Neil, Humphrey and Clive himself. The extremely common power, at silver rank, left five crystals floating around Hendren that not only intercepted magical projectiles but reflected them back. This sent Clive's staff blasts back in his own direction, where his own three crystals absorbed the attacks.

Clive fought cross-legged on the bag of Onslow, the floating tortoise offering him some easy manoeuvrability on the rough terrain of the ruined building. He didn't have Onslow use his powers, which were better for picking off small fry.

Belinda didn't even bother with weapons, concentrating on the support role. Her echo spirit familiar was helping Humphrey make illusionary duplicate attacks, which partially compensated for his speed deficit against the archbishop, as well as his lesser ability to navigate the dangerously unstable footing.

The force-bolts of lantern familiar, Shimmer, proved more dangerous to her than the enemy, given Hendren's defences. She could have used it to help Clive overwhelm those defences to get his staff-blasts through, but the reflected damage was an extra threat they couldn't afford. Instead, she used it to project shields to protect her and Clive from the occasional blast of Hendren's own staff, sent in their direction. That left Neil free to concentrate on keeping Sophie and Humphrey in fighting shape.

Stash had shifted form again and taken the shape of a needle scorpion, with tough armour and the ability to shoot spines from its tail at a distance. Gordon was also attacking from a distance with beams.

In spite of the ranged attackers, it was Sophie and Humphrey that held the archbishop's attention the most. Ultimately, their bronze-rank power could not inflict any critical wounds against his incredible, silver-rank resilience. Only Humphrey had proven a genuine threat, with his powerful attacks and ability to ignore the resistance Hendren otherwise enjoyed against lower-ranked attacks. The threat of Humphrey and mobility of Sophie were the only things preventing Hendren from running rampant over the battlefield.

Sophie's attacks, while only minimal in damage, did punch through the silver-ranker's defences. It was her physical intervention that was the greater impediment, however. Just through positioning she was constantly setting up Humphrey to make attacks, heightening the threat he posed.

Blocking an overhead blow from Hendren's staff drove Humphrey to one knee, despite getting his sword up in time to block it. Hendren followed up with a kick to the chest that sent Humphrey tumbling back, although he didn't go far across the rubble.

Sophie could almost match his speed and could certainly match his skill. Her damage was limited, however, and her special abilities were being countered. Hendren was an experienced fighter, and it showed. He seemed to know which abilities he could ignore, which, required blocking and which required an active counter from an ability of his own.

When Sophie tried to blast him off his feet with her wind power, for example, he planted his staff and used an immovability power. Sophie's ability then did nothing more than ruffle the priest's combat robes.

Humphrey and the archbishop met weapon to weapon, dodging attacks and hitting back hard, Hendren making full use of his superior speed to force openings and follow up with special attacks. Even with his potent armour, it was only the steady stream of shields and healing from Neil that kept Humphrey in the fight.

Jason was keeping Colin inside him, concerned that the priest of Purity may well have had an answer to Colin's swarm state. If the silver-ranker had some kind of area power it could rapidly pulverise the leeches, so Jason kept Colin at the ready. Once more of the priest's bigger powers had been teased out and put on cooldown, he had Colin for a trump card if necessary. At the moment, he was more interested in the extra healing that Colin would provide him.

Jason was acutely aware of how dangerous the enemy was. Jason was not as resilient as Humphrey and Sophie. One good hit from a silver-rank special attack could kill him outright. His normal methods of sneaking around, using Shade's bodies to stage blindside attacks would be far less effective against silver-rank senses.

His only margin for error was however much he could stack up the protective power of his amulet by laying on afflictions, but there was only so many he could land with spells alone. A scroll of system messages reflected the stark reality of fighting a Purity priest using afflictions.

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- [Umbral Snake Venom] has been cleansed from [Nicolas Hendren].
  - [Necrotoxin] has been cleansed from [Nicolas Hendren].
  - [Leech Toxin] has been cleansed from [Nicolas Hendren].
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Hendren constantly and passively cleansed himself, meaning that Jason would need to bring his dagger into play to overwhelm that power. Unless he could get a good base of afflictions that his Inexorable Doom spell could then build upon, Hendren's cleansing

power would wipe even that spell away. He was hesitant about jumping into the fray, as even with the reach of his shadow arms, the danger the archbishop posed was a daunting proposition.

The only bright spot was that the one hit Jason had landed early was the Punish special attack. It had delivered the Price of Absolution ability, which Hendren's ability was apparently unable to cleanse. The effect itself was minor, inflicting a small amount of transcendent damage whenever a Sin affliction was cleansed from the target. The damage was negligible to the silver ranker, but the important part was that the affliction stuck. It indicated that Hendren's cleansing powers might not be able to remove holy afflictions.

While Jason was being largely ineffectual, Clive charged up and unleashed his most powerful spell, Wrath of the Magister. It was further boosted by Neil's Bolster spell, which enhanced a single ability use. Clive was confident that it had the potency to really hurt even a silver-ranker.

Clive unleashed the spell and the rainbow light poured from his hands, but Hendren held up his own hand in a stopping motion and a magic circle appeared in the air in front of it. The rainbow light of Clive's spell deflected off the magical shield, Hendren redirecting it at Humphrey instead.

Clive couldn't abort the spell without suffering a backlash he definitely wouldn't survive. He was forced to go through with it, but the rest of the team did not let him down. Their hard-won experience shone through as they reacted instantly to the unexpected reversal. Jason's shadow hand snaked out and slapped Humphrey on the back, passing over all the charges he had accumulated on his amulet. Neil threw up a shield and a second, wall like shield appeared between Humphrey and the spell, courtesy of Belinda's familiar.

Despite the best protection they could offer, Clive's power created a void in Humphrey's chest. The shield's siphoned off enough power that the void was smaller than normal, but still ripped a hole in Humphrey's armour and torso that would have killed an iron ranker outright. Even a sturdy bronze-ranker like Humphrey collapsed immediately to the ground, hovering on the brink of death.

The pressure was suddenly off Hendren, but instead of pressing Sophie or the team, he took the chance to start dismantling the mess of summons that had been hounding him. The dragon tooth warriors were battered apart in short order and he went to work on the golem, which was swiftly pushed into its chrysalis state. As much as she wanted to protect that source of pressure on Hendren, Sophie stood by as he tore through their support. She



was not going to give him an opening to finish the job on the stricken Humphrey until her teammate was back on his feet.

Hendren threw her a sneer, fully aware of her intentions. After demolishing the summons, he used the freedom of not being attacked to cast a spell. A large mass of disruptive-force blasted at Gordon, massively damaging the incorporeal entity. The floating cloak of its body tore like tissue paper and Jason immediately drew his familiar back into himself.

In a move that left the team in shock, Hendren then demonstrated that not every special attack at his command a low-cooldown power with commensurately moderate damage. He raised up his staff and the runes etched into it started to brightly glow. He hammered the end down on the chrysalis state of the golem which, to date, had proven impervious to any form of attack. Not only was it damaged, but cracks spread throughout, glowing with the same light as the runes on the staff. The glow grew brighter and the cracks kept spreading until the chrysalis and the golem inside exploded, raining crystal over the battlefield before dissolving into stinking, rainbow smoke.