

Chapter 226

Greenhouse Flowers

As they anticipated, they reached all twelve towers without encountering the cultists.

“Shouldn’t the pillars be central to what they’re trying to achieve?” Jason asked as they team stood atop the final tower. “Whether it’s trying to sever the connection to the world, or do something with the giant golems inside them, the towers should be key, right?”

“Yes,” Clive said. “Between their absence here and whatever they’re doing to raise the magical density, I find myself extremely concerned. Before we even came in here, we knew that none of the people on our potential cultist list had the kind of astral magic expertise that would be required to truly accomplish anything. There was always the question of how they were going to sever this astral space, but now it seems that there is more to the cult’s scheme than we realised.”

Before they had left, the backgrounds of the suspected cultists had been thoroughly investigated. They were all local, from lower-tier aristocracy or wealthy non-aristocrat families. Because the families involved didn’t have the political clout to stop it, the Adventure Society had scoured the homes and investigated the relations of the suspects for any and all information they could find. Most of the families had no indication of cult activity, while others had already been exposed as cult sympathisers during the purge.

“Our biggest point of confusion was that the people we’re after simply don’t have the skill set to accomplish the cult’s goals, as we understand them,” Clive continued. “Our best guess was that they brought something with them, some manner of artefact or device that could do what they needed. Now, it seems that our ignorance of their objectives was even greater than we thought. We don’t know if they still want to claim the astral space, awaken these constructs or if it’s something to do with the changes to the ambient magic.”

“Are we sure we shouldn’t try destroying one of those constructs?” Neil asked.

“Very,” Clive said. “We wouldn’t be able to, anyway. Even Humphrey and Jason, who can overlook rank disparity in certain regards, wouldn’t be able to damage them. All they would accomplish would be to trigger any defence mechanisms that might be in place. That’s not even considering that the golems might, in some way, be essential to the core function of the towers, which is to stabilise this astral space.”

“The astral space is going to become unstable anyway, though, isn’t it?” Jason asked. “Won’t an unnaturally high level of magical density eventually make the dimensional wall break down?”

“That’s right,” Clive said. “If something is pushing through magic that’s too high-grade for the dimensional wall to endure, it will eventually break down. It’ll take quite a while, by which I mean a decade or longer, but if whatever is causing the change isn’t stopped, it will happen eventually. Even if it is stopped, if that happens too late, the damage will be done.”

“What would the effects of that be?” Humphrey asked.

“If the dimensional wall between the physical reality of this astral space breaks down,” Clive said, “then astral forces will pour in like a tide and wash everything away. This astral space will no longer exist.”

“What would the repercussions of that be for our world?” Humphrey asked.

“Actually, that would be fine for our world,” Clive said, “The astral space would be washed off the side of our world like washing dirt off your arm.”

“That’s not what the Builder wants, though,” Jason said. “He wants to take astral spaces, not destroy them. Especially, I would think, when they’re loaded up with his property.”

“Hopefully the cultists have some answers,” Humphrey said. “If they aren’t in the centre of the city, we’ll just have to start following the soul compass, clearing out the flesh abominations as we find them. Eventually it will lead us to the cultists.”

The team turned their monster-filled trek toward the interior of the city. For the first time, they experienced a rapid shift in the direction the soul compass was pointing. It signalled their proximity to what, unsurprisingly, turned out to be a flesh abomination. The abominations outnumbered the cultists by more than fifty to one and the cultists were almost certainly together. The abominations were solitary by nature, aggressively lashing out at any living thing they encountered. That left them scattered all around the city, compared to whatever rock the cultists were hiding under.

Given that fighting the abominations was one of their explicit goals in returning to the astral space, they had given some consideration to how to do so. The abominations had two advantages, being their ability to adapt and the power of an upper-tier bronze-rank monster. The weaknesses the team sought to exploit was a lack of intelligence and the fact that while it could adapt, it always remained a creature of living flesh.

The first weakness they hoped to exploit by ‘confusing’ the monster’s adaptations, alternating modes of attack to soak up time as it changed back and forth. To do this, the plan was to have Sophie and Humphrey repeatedly switch off against the monster, forcing it to adapt alternately to her speed and then to his power. The hope was that doing so would prevent a singular adaptation it could use to effectively fight the team.

The purpose in stalling out the fight was to exploit the abomination's second weakness, the inability to overcome Jason's afflictions. They knew from fighting one previously that it would adapt to prevent itself from losing combat effectiveness, but that eventually there would be a threshold beyond which it could no longer sustain itself.

The abomination was lairing in an old church, although not one of any god the team recognised. What little remained of the iconography was wholly unfamiliar, and they had little time to examine it before the abomination sensed their presence. They waited outside where they could take advantage of the open space and have the bulk of the team at a safe remove. It was a large, blobby mass of pink and yellow flesh, ambling out onto the street on four stubby legs.

The abomination's inactive state was its weakest, when it was slow and soft, which Jason took full advantage of. He opened with spells and then followed with special attacks, using his shadow arm to keep his distance. He laid on his afflictions with practised efficiency as the abomination was already changing its form in response.

As Jason danced around it, casting spells and reaching out with special attacks, the abomination grew tentacles, all over its round body, that ended in vicious claws. The result looked like a Lovecraftian echidna, the flexible limbs lashing too try and catch Jason wherever he went.

By the time the creature truly got going, Jason's job was done and he cleanly teleported away. Communicating through voice chat, Humphrey teleported in, directly taking his place. The quick and flexible limbs, useful for pinning down the elusive Jason, lacked the strength to dig through Humphrey's armour as he launched himself forward, burying his sword in the abomination's side.

The creature reacted by growing thick, chitinous plates that would protect it, while the many limbs consolidated into fewer larger, more powerful ones. These were also covered in chitin; resembling long, sharp, preying mantis arms. The completion of its adaptation signalled Humphrey's departure, as he teleported out again. In his place, Sophie rushed in like a storm to face the now sluggish, heavily-plated creature.

The creature swung its powerful limbs at her. They weren't slow, but it took more than not slow to catch Sophie. She deftly avoided them as she attacked the plated body with fists and feet. Her attacks were not as powerful as Humphrey's, but the resonating-force power her abilities added to her unarmed strikes was able to penetrate the heavy armour.

It seemed like everything would go perfectly to plan as Sophie and Humphrey switched off in rapid succession, forcing the monstrosity into continuous adaptation. It became evident it would not be quite so easy as it first seemed, however, as the

abomination's adaptations became more and more refined. Slowly it transmogrified into a lean, insect-like creature with strong plates but agile limbs, hard to catch and hard to hurt.

It had two, whip-like tendrils with segmented shards of razor-sharp chitin. They thrashed and danced, strong enough to hurt Humphrey, yet swift and unpredictable enough to catch Sophie. Neil threw out shields and healing from a safe distance but the fight was slowly turning against them. The longer the fight went on, the closer the abomination came to finding the perfect combination of traits.

The fight seemed of the verge of flipping against them as the abomination continued to morph itself into the perfect weapon. Sophie and Humphrey were desperately fighting together, as Clive and Belinda added their support. They had been holding off for the most dangerous moment, not wanting the abomination to have adapted when they came in at a critical point.

Clive opened up with his powerful attack spell, then unleashed it a second and third time with Belinda's help. Before she then copied it to use herself. Clive's spell was slow and difficult to use, but one of the advantages as it could attack in multiple ways.

Ability: [Wrath of the Magister] (Magic)

- Spell (fire, magic, curse, poison, wounding, ice, dimension)
 - Cost: Moderate mana plus additional mana per effect.
 - Cooldown: 1 minute.

 - Current rank: Iron 9 (61%).

 - Effect (iron): Lock a prismatic beam onto an enemy. Expend additional mana to alter the target's reality, using any combination of the available colour effects. This cannot be used in conjunction with the other variant of this spell, which requires an alternate incantation.

 - Effect (iron): Lock a prismatic beam onto an enemy. Expend additional mana to unmake reality in a localised area, creating an annihilating void sphere inside the target. This effect requires magic to be channelled into the target at an extreme mana cost until sufficient mana has been channelled to trigger the effect.

 - [Red] (high mana): Target's temperature is significantly increased (frost burn if combined with blue).
 - [Yellow] (high mana): Target's abilities have increased mana cost.
 - [Pink] (moderate mana): Target's resistances are reduced.
 - [Green] (moderate mana): Target's blood is poisonous to itself.
 - [Purple] (very high mana): Expending mana harms the target.
 - [Orange] (very high mana): Target suffers increased damage from all sources.
 - [Blue] (high mana): Target's temperature is significantly decreased (frost burn if combined with red).
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Clive had various abilities that gave him a larger mana pool than most adventurers of his rank. Knowing that he would only be casting a few spells, he went all out. His first casting of the spell reduced the abomination's resistances, made its own blood poisonous and made it take more damage from all sources. The second spell combined heat and cold into a potent frost burn effect, stronger than either individually. His third spell used the void sphere variation to devastating effect, Belinda following up immediately with a second one.

The overwhelming barrage of magic pushed the abomination over the edge. The chitin was scored and cracked from the frost burn, while chunks were missing altogether, the annihilation sphere carving them out like scoops of ice cream. No longer able to hold back the afflictions, the creature collapsed on the ground, dark filth spilling out like a rotten egg that had been cracked open.

The team had seen some graphic things in their time, but the miserable, rotting demise of the flesh creature was especially hard to watch. The stench that struck them after was even worse, a near match for the rainbow smoke of a monster dissolving.

"It's hard to imagine that thing used to be a person," Neil said.

"It's about as bad an end as I can imagine," Clive said. "A prison of rage and madness built from your own twisted body. The only escape you can hope for is the release of death, yet you cannot die until someone brings about your violent demise."

"It's good that we're doing this," Sophie said. "I've had my share of bad situations, but nothing like this. I'm glad we can help them."

The rest of the team nodded their sombre agreement.

"Thank you," Shade said. "Most of these abominations have been suffering for centuries."

"One down, a few hundred to go," Humphrey said. "We have a lot of work ahead of us."

The island city was a roughly circular forty kilometres across. If not for the streets being overrun by monster-filled jungle, it would be a matter of hours to reach the centre. During the trials, the teams had all taken their time, testing themselves against the environment and seeking out treasure, knowing they had the time to do so. Jason and his team took a more direct approach, but were careful.

They could have taken hours if they pushed it, or teleported directly in. Clive, Jason and Humphrey each could have taken them into the building they had rested in while awaiting the final stage of the trials, which would have been a relatively safe place to

arrive. While hidden from the eyes of any cultists present, though, there would be no hiding the ostentatious magic of a portal opening from their magical senses. Given that the cultists were bronze-rank now, they would have as many people with enhanced magic senses as Jason and his team.

Their time in the astral space was increasingly an ordeal. Every day had been an endless slog of monsters, from the numerous to the powerful, and the team was rapidly becoming exhausted. One evening, as the team rested in the cloud house, Jason and Humphrey were sitting together on the roof.

“At some stage, we’ll need to stop for a rest day,” Humphrey said.

“Just hide out in the cloud house and recover?” Jason asked.

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “This ongoing pressure is good for our advancement, but I don’t want to go past the point it stops driving us forward and starts dragging us down.”

“I don’t think we’re there yet,” Jason said. “These monsters are either bronze-rank or a crowd of iron-ranks, so it’s been driving the team to rely on each other more. If we’re ever going to have the kind of teamwork that Valdis’ team has, we need that.”

“I don’t want to come into a conflict with the cultists when the team is blunted from overuse,” Humphrey said. “I want to meet them while we’re a freshly-sharpened knife. Does that mean refreshed from a well earned rest, though, or in a strong rhythm, on the back of a series of successful monster fights?”

“Ask Neil,” Jason said. “He’s our healer and he does his job well. He pays more attention to the condition of the team than anyone.”

Humphrey nodded.

“You’re right,” he said. “One of the last pieces of advice my mother gave me before we left was to rely on the team. She said I shouldn’t fall into the trap of trying to do everything myself. I suppose that isn’t just restricted to combat, is it?”

“No,” Jason said. “It’s a trap we could both easily fall into. I’ve learned the hard way that I’m not always as clever and insightful as I think I am.”

He let out a sigh, heavy with regret.

“I’ve been thinking about Thadwick a lot,” Jason said. “I’ve come to realise that he and I are very similar.”

“Really?” Humphrey asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “We share the same flaws. Arrogance, vanity, being self-impressed and having a need to show off. The real difference between us is that I’ve had people to slap some sense into me, where the people around him just reinforced the idea that he was special. His mother was off adventuring for most of his life and his father was

grooming him as heir. His head was filled with how great and important he was going to be, without tempering it with humility. He never had the sense of responsibility your mother drilled into you, or the friends that pull me back into line when I go too far off the rails.”

“I suppose I can see it,” Humphrey said. “Perhaps Thadwick saw it too. Maybe that’s why he was so fixated on you.”

“That makes sense,” Jason said. “I eventually realised that the reason I took such a dislike to Thadwick is that but for sycophancy, there goes I.”

“Things have worked out for you a lot better than they have for Thadwick,” Humphrey said.

“Thadwick is what we call a greenhouse flower, in my world,” Jason said. “Outside of the specific environment in which he was raised, he withers. He was never taught to withstand rough weather.”

“I had some of that, too,” Humphrey said. “I think my mother regrets how much she shielded me from.”

“I’m the same,” Jason said. “My homeland is much safer than this world. My family has money, not like yours, but enough to live better lives than most. For you and I, though, there was always someone who recognised that we would have to make our own way, sooner or later. They prepared us for that. For Thadwick, his parents always intended to make his way for him, and he paid the price of that.”

“You still feel sorry for him, after all that he’s done?” Humphrey said. “Trying to kill you, running off to the Builder cult?”

“I do,” Jason said.

“Do you think there’s a path to redemption for him?”

“No,” Jason said. “He’s gone too far, done too much. His choices have hurt too many. There’s no way back for him, now.”