

## Chapter 248

### Forsaken Place

Humphrey lay on the ground, barely conscious, his life spilling from the savage wound in his chest. The rest of the team's circumstances were not much more promising, with the summons destroyed and the seemingly indestructible enemy too dangerous to even approach. Jason's afflictions, the means by which they had overcome so many strong enemies, were falling off as fast as he could put them on, even the ones being applied retributively by Jason's aura. The team's most powerful magic attack had been turned back on them, leaving them in the precarious position they now found themselves.

Hendren had seized the chance to alleviate the pressure on him by destroying the summons and sending Jason's familiar into a state not much better than what Humphrey was in. The only blessing was the brief reprieve the team received in turn as the silver-ranker's attacks were not aimed at them. Neil, not needing to be primed to throw a shield out at zero notice, had time to cast his big, long-cooldown healing spell.

Fountain of Renewal combined powerful, healing and mana recovery effects that covered the whole the team, at the cost of a cooldown measured in hours. Despite that potency, however, the spell did not save Humphrey's life. That was accomplished by a power of Humphrey's own.

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#### Ability: [Immortality] (Might)

- Special ability (healing, recovery)
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 3 (16%).
  
- Effect (iron): Instantly restore a large portion of health, mana and stamina. Amount restored is based on how depleted health, mana and stamina are when the ability is activated.
  
- Effect (bronze): Gain ongoing health, mana and stamina recovery effects. The strength of these effects is based on how depleted health, mana and stamina are when the ability is activated.

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It was the power Humphrey had gotten from the legendary awakening stone of rebirth, his share of the reward from Emir for success in their first journey to the astral space. The effects were miraculous, healing light blazing from under Humphrey's skin, all through his body. At iron rank, the light would fade after the initial healing, but at bronze

rank, the light merely dimmed. Humphrey pushed himself to his feet, the crater in his chest reduced to a gaping wound.

The wound continued to heal from the potent healing effects stacked on Humphrey; the lingering effect of his Immortality power and the effect of Neil's spell. Fountain of Renewal actually conjured a fountain in their air, spraying illusory water than carried very real rejuvenating power. There was also the effect of the amulet shield that Jason had passed over. When consumed, the instances of protection became an ongoing healing effect.

Humphrey reconjured his armour that had a large hole in the front and the sword which had vanished when he dropped it as he fell. Humphrey then went after Hendren like a man possessed.

It was not fury; his mother had trained him too long and too hard to let rage take over. It was a controlled intensity, driven by his passion but not consumed by it. Every bit of strength and skill Humphrey could muster he unloaded onto the archbishop, who was startled to find himself pushed back by an enemy he had thought finished. Hendren had dealt with most of the summons, yet to him, it was as if his foes had doubled in number, not halved.

Jason took the chance to get in some sneaky hits, Hendren letting them go as he withstood Humphrey's barrage. With no immediate harm, Hendren trusted his ongoing cleansing powers to continue handling the afflictions. Jason was happy for him to think that, finally having enough of an affliction buffer to lock in some spells that would stick.

Humphrey's resurgence was a powerful swing in the fight, but it could not solve the ultimate issue that they could not land definitive damage on their opponent. Humphrey's surge could not last forever and inexorably, the archbishop retook the momentum.

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Without the summons at his back, Hendren was better able to focus on Sophie and Humphrey, battering them such that Neil's shields and healing, even with Belinda's support, was being slowly, yet inevitably overtaken. If not for the overlapping mana recovery effects the team enjoyed, Neil's contribution would have already run out.

The team still managed to hold on. Hendren realised that even though he had pushed back the assault of Humphrey, the thief girl, Wexler, was becoming harder and harder to deal with. A traditional guardian-type was most effective against a multitude of lesser attackers, whose myriad strikes couldn't breach their defences. She thrived against a single attackers, evading powerful attacks that a traditional defence-focused adventurer could not endure.

Hendren had found her hard to deal with from the start, always exactly where he didn't want her to be. Even though he was faster than her, she clearly knew how to make better use of her speed, which left him feeling slower. He could only periodically land hits with the aid of his special attacks, and even then, she had some ability that accumulated defensive power over time and expended it in protective force when she was finally hit.

Without the additional trouble of the summons, he had been free to make several attempts to focus her down, but every time he did she became even more elusive. She would suddenly speed up, his magical senses detecting space itself warping as her reflexes briefly eclipsed his own.

Even some of his special attacks had fallen short. He had tried to pin her down with an attack that duplicated his staff and attacked multiple times, faster than he even his silver-rank perception could follow. She had turned into a blur that impossibly dodged or blocked every attack.

Now, when he felt he should be pushing the enemy past the point of resistance, she was harder to deal with than ever. Her attacks were growing stronger; not just the impact but the magical damage that came with every strike. His own attacks were harming her less and less, while attacking anyone but her triggered retribution damage that passed right through his defences.

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For Sophie's part, she had never felt more powerful. Never had they encountered an enemy that could hold up so imperviously to everything the team could throw at him. The result was that an ability that had limited impact on fights in the past became increasingly important.

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#### Ability: [Karmic Warrior] (Balance)

- Special Ability (healing, recovery)
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 3 (20%).
  
- Effect (iron): Gain an instance of [Agent of Karma] when subjected to damage or any harmful effect, even if the damage and/or effect was wholly negated.
  
- Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Good Karma] when healing others, cleansing others or suffering damage. Enemies that attack or take offensive actions against you are inflicted with [Bad Karma]. So long as any enemy has an instance of [Bad Karma], you have [Karmic Sacrifice].

- [Agent of Karma] (boon, holy): Bonus to the [Power] and [Spirit] attributes. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  - [Bad Karma] (affliction, retributive, holy): Suffer a small amount of retributive, transcendent damage when making an attack or other offensive action against anyone without the [Karmic Sacrifice] boon. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  - [Good Karma] (boon, holy, stacking): Bonus to [Recovery]. Damage from enemies with [Bad Karma] is reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  - [Karmic Sacrifice] (boon, holy, heal-over-time): Gain an ongoing healing effect, with strength determined by the amount of [Good Karma] you have accrued. This effect immediately ends if there are no enemies suffering from [Bad Karma].
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Every attack that landed made her all the stronger. She eventually realised that the archbishop had caught onto this and was no longer trying to finish her off with special attacks, simply trying to manage her as he went harder at Humphrey.

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Hendren's perception power let him sense the boons and afflictions, so he sensed the holy power gathering on the thief girl each time he landed a hit. Frustratingly, his ongoing cleansing powers could not eliminate holy effects. He only had one power that could, but he was saving it for when Asano made his inevitable move.

The thief girl was moving from a nuisance to a powerhouse, but it was still within the realm of bronze rank. She was not yet enough of a problem that Hendren had to take drastic action. For all that her damage was increasing, plus the retribution damage that went right through his defences, it was not yet on a scale that threatened his silver-rank fortitude. His ongoing health recovery was still enough to compensate, which meant that, for the moment, he could afford to leave her be.

Hendren had been paying attention to Asano throughout the fight, despite the affliction specialist accomplishing no more than a few futile spells, the afflictions quickly falling away. During Humphrey's push, Asano had managed to get a few afflictions in place with melee attacks, using those stretching shadow arms to attack from relative safety.

As the fight progressed, it became clear to Hendren that the afflictions Asano had put in place were multiplying themselves faster than his passive ability was clearing them off. He realised that Asano and Sophie were the primary threats, the type that never tired and grew stronger and stronger, the longer a fight went on.

Hendren felt the magic in the afflictions on himself activate when Asano used a spell, sending death energy through his body and rotting at his flesh. Hendren knew then that it was time to reset the board and put paid to the power Asano and the thief girl were building up.

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The team was blasted back as Hendren used a new special attack. He set his staff floating in the air in front of his outstretched palm, spinning in a rapid blur and blasting out wind akin to Sophie's Wind Wave power. It inflicted no damage but knocked the whole team back as Hendren swept his arms around, the windmilling staff moving with it. Only the heavy Onslow was unmoved, who turned a slow, disgruntled head around as Clive tumbled off his shell.

Hendren used the moment he bought to cast a spell, holding an arm up where a sphere of clean, white light started shining. It erupted out in a blinding flash, washing over everyone. For a short but critical moment, the team were unable to see.

"You think afflictions can take down a priest of Purity?" Hendren called out as the team recovered.

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- All of your affliction on [Nicolas Hendren] have been cleansed by an effect that ignores all cleanse prevention.
  - All of your boons and the boons on your items have been negated by an effect that ignores dispel prevention.
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The dazzle faded and the team's vision returned to find that Hendren had made a move on Neil while the team couldn't see. This had been trumped by Belinda, who had anticipated Hendren making a big move, casting her own spell as he had cast his.

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#### Ability: [Unexpected Allies] (Charlatan)

- Special Ability (dimension, teleport, illusion)
  - Cost: Very high mana.
  - Cooldown: 10 minutes.
  
  - Current rank: Bronze 1 (67%).
  
  - Effect (iron): You and your allies take on the illusionary form of nearby enemies, but your allies can still recognise one another. All allies and enemies in the area are randomly switch-teleported.
  
  - Effect (bronze): Create illusions of your allies.
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Hendren had seen a lot of powers in his career, but Belinda's unusual suite of abilities was filled with rarities. As well as being a delight to Clive, it let her affect battles in ways their enemies didn't anticipate.

Every member of the team had been altered by illusion to look exactly like Hendren himself, while illusionary doubles of the team had been brought into being, then switch-teleported with the real thing. Hendren's attack when the team was blinded killed off nothing but an illusion.

The team was out of formation, scattered randomly by Belinda's power. It left them all out of position but Hendren had no way of telling one team member from another until they acted and broke the illusion. Unsurprisingly, this started with Sophie and Humphrey, who lunged at Hendren. Closer than either of them, one of the illusionary archbishops started chanting out one of Neil's healing spells and Hendren made a rushing attack to interrupt.

'Neil' avoided the attack by vanishing into his own shadow, appearing nearby and slashing at the archbishop with a dagger held in a shadow arm as a cloak of stars appeared around him. He disappeared into another of Shade's bodies right before Hendren annihilated it with a staff attack shrouded in disruptive force.

Sophie and Humphrey were on Hendren then, as Jason fired off spells as quickly as he could coherently chant the incantations. As he did, he received a warning from Shade, who still had two bodies positioned between their current location and the Builder's walled fort.

"Shade just told me reinforcements are on the way," Jason told the others through voice chat. "We have to get this done, so I'm going aggressive. Neil, I'm going to need those shields. Belinda, help him keep them coming, because I'm going to need it. First, though, I'm going to need the good stuff."

"Are you sure?" Neil asked.

"I don't have time not to be," Jason said.

"Alright," Neil said. "Here goes."

Neil chanted a spell and Jason felt a power flood through him like a supercharged spirit coin.

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#### Ability: [Hero's Moment] (Growth)

- Spell (boon, holy, recovery)
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 2 (87%).

- **Effect (iron):** Bestow a powerful boon on an ally, increasing all attributes and resistances by a significant amount. They receive damage reduction, their maximum mana and stamina are increased and they gain ongoing mana and stamina recovery. They ignore the effects of rank-disparity. When this effect ends, they are temporarily debilitated, suffering the inverse of all previous effects.
  - **Effect (bronze):** Affected ally's essence abilities have increased effect.
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Neil then used his Bolster spell, which Jason used to conjure a new and more powerful dagger. The bolstered version would make the afflictions it bestowed more potent than normal.

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Hendren's silver-rank senses were allowed him to pay attention to the whole field of battle. He had figured out which of his enemies was which, and which were illusions. He spotted the healer throwing spell's on Asano and knew a push was coming. It galled him that bronze-rankers had driven him this hard and knew he needed to put an end to proceedings.

He made another dash at the healer, but it was a feint as he immediately stopped and used a special attack on the empty space in front of him. The thief girl fell for the bait, moving into place right as the attack activated. Light shone up from the ground, trapping her in place.

It would normally only hold someone for a short moment, but a silver-rank power on a bronze-rank enemy gave him more time to spare. He turned on Humphrey, charging into support and again used his spinning-staff wind blast to send Humphrey flying.

He turned back to the thief girl, who had been discovering that movement powers were suppressed in the silver-rank trapping field. He raised up his staff, the runes glowing brightly, the way it had when he shattered the golem chrysalis into fragments. He brought it down on the thief girl as the light field faded away.

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Sophie caught the descending staff in one hand, leaving the archbishop in disbelieving shock. She gave him a savage grin as she slapped a palm right into his chest. Red light glowed under her hand, the same light that had spread through the golem and destroyed it. The light spread through the archbishop's chest and then exploded, leaving him with a wound much like Clive had left on Humphrey.

Hendren was a silver-ranker, however, not a bronze. His body was closer to the amorphous flesh Clive had once described to the team, and his fortitude was far higher. Even with a gaping cavity where a normal person's heart and a good chunk of their lungs

would be, Hendren little more than paused before resuming the fight with Sophie. He hadn't even dropped his staff.

His body started glowing with internal light as he activated a powerful self-healing ability. Humphrey arriving back to press the fight once more.

Jason also joined the melee, with both himself and his dagger rippling with power. He was faster, stronger and tougher than ever before. Around him were three of Shade's bodies; all that were still present. Of the seven total bodies, two were still off scouting, one had self-destructed in the enemy camp and one had been destroyed by Hendren.

Jason had a very different form of aggression to Humphrey or Sophie. In the early days of his training, he had naïve ideas about being the perfect counter-striker, deceptive and cunning. As his understanding of fighting developed and he gain new powers, he had gained a better understanding of what was possible and what worked best for him.

He had kept the deceptive and manipulative parts, using his cloak, his shadow arms and the bodies of Shade to play with perception and distance, toying with his enemies. He even used aura manipulation to project false positions.

The goal was to provide opportunities that, for other fighters, were worthless. When all he needed was there merest wound, his idea of a successful attack was, to other fighters, a failed strike. It was an unusual margin for success that allowed him to use trickery that for most fighters would be wasteful play-acting.

Jason used every trick in his repertoire against the silver-rank priest. Even empowered by Neil's incredible spell, he was not the equal in speed or strength of the archbishop. He did prove, however, that he was a match in skill after all.

Again and again, Jason made nothing but a grazing slash, but that was all he was after. his empowered dagger revealed the lack of protectiveness combat robes suffered in return for flexibility and lightness. As someone who used them himself, it was something he was very much aware of, using that knowledge to know how far he had to push. All the while, Sophie and Humphrey pushed the archbishop as well.

That was not to say that Hendren did not hammer blows on all three in return, especially focusing on Jason. For a short while, though, Neil was assisted by Belinda in burning through cooldowns to repeat shields on Jason. His afflictions stacking up also quickly added stacks to his amulet. Even piling on, however, they could not outlast a silver-rank essence user. Hendren continued relentlessly, the healing light closing the wound on his chest even as the others flagged. Jason took a couple of big hits, hurting him even though the layers of protection.



“It’s time for the second coming of Humphrey,” Jason said through voice chat. In response, Belinda cast a spell on Neil.

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Ability: [Blessing of Relentlessness] (Adept)

- Spell (boon, magic, recovery)
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 2 (94%).
  
- Effect (iron): Reset all cooldowns of a single ally of bronze-rank or below.
  
- Effect (bronze): Affected ally gains a powerful, ongoing mana and stamina recovery effect.

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It was the big sister to her ability to reset one affliction, giving one ally a once-per-day full power reset. The advantage of letting someone with their own once-per-day power use it back-to-back was obvious.

Neil repeated his Hero’s Moment spell, this time on Humphrey. As when he recovered from Clive’s spell, Humphrey pushed hard into Hendren, surging forward in an aggressive attack. Neil’s potent boon, normally usable only once per day, raised his strength to a level even above his silver-rank opponent.

Neil followed up with his Giant’s Might spell for good measure, turning Humphrey into a towering hulk that could for the brief while the spells lasted, overpower his enemy with pure strength. With both Jason and Humphrey under the effect of the spell, though there was a danger looming at the end of the spell’s duration.

Neil’s Hero’s Moment spell was a Cinderella magic, and when it wore off, Jason and Humphrey would turn back into pumpkins. The spell’s end would bring with it debilitating effects as potent as the boosts the pair currently enjoyed.

Jason went wild with his dagger piling on afflictions, before leaving Humphrey to bundle up the priest while Jason backed off to cast spells. He locked in his full affliction sequence, under a heavy block of dagger-inflicted maledictions, then cast Punition, which inflicted damage for every affliction he was suffering. Finally, the familiar traces of black rot from Jason’s power became visible on the enemy.

Hendren slammed his staff into the ground, sending out a blast wave that knocked even the giant, empowered Humphrey away, let alone the rest of the team. Further, he left the staff standing vertically in place, blasting out force waves that continued pushing them away. Unaffected himself, Hendren started chanting out a spell.

A bolt of dark blue magic erupted from Belinda's outstretched hand, still laying on the ground where the wave of force had sent her falling. It ignored the pulsing waves of force and struck Hendren mid-incantation. Belinda's aura was flush with the power of the silver-rank spirit coin she had just taken to make sure her attack was not resisted.

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#### Ability: [Power Thief] (Magic)

- Special attack (boon, affliction, magic)
- Cost: very high mana.
- Cooldown: 5 minutes.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 3 (21%).
  
- Effect (iron): Make a magical ranged attack. You become able to use a random active-use ability of the target, who cannot use that ability until you have done so. It can be an essence ability or the inherent ability of a magic creature, but functions at your rank, not the rank of the target. You may not use the ability more than once. This ability cannot be used again until the copied ability is used. If not used within 24 hours, the copied ability is lost, restoring the target's ability to use it.
  
- Effect (bronze): You can choose a specific ability of the target. If the target does not have that ability, a random ability is stolen instead.

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One thing that Belinda had learned about this particular power was that when choosing a specific ability, she wasn't restricted to just designating abilities she knew the target possessed. She was able to designate as the targeted ability one that the enemy was in the process of using. Her instant-use special attack was faster than the somewhat lengthy spell Hendren had bought the time to cast with his force wave power, and his spell was cut off as she stole it for herself.

She collapsed as the power of the spirit coin drained out of her. She would be able to make no more contribution to the fight, while Jason and Humphrey were close to being the same. They could both feel Neil's spell reaching the limit of its duration, while they were still held back by the waves emitting from the staff.

"You think that's enough?" Hendren screamed wildly, spitting mania. "You think it can ever be enough? There is no stain that true Purity cannot burn out!"

Hendren started casting yet another cleansing spell, but Jason used one that was faster.

*"Feed me your sins."*

The priest's life-force became visible, filled with a distressing amount of taint for a priest of Purity. Jason's Feast of Absolution spell took it all. Jason's passive Sin Eater

power gave him an immediate burst of mana and stamina, along with a pile of the Integrity boon, granting ongoing health, stamina and mana recovery.

More importantly, Feast of Absolution left, in the wake of the dark and sinister afflictions, the transcendent light of holy afflictions. They filled up his life force, then lit up Hendren from the inside when his life force once again retracted out of sight.

Hendren fought through the pain and finished his own cleansing spell which, to his shock, did nothing.

“Holy?” he asked as he dropped to one knee. “How can it be holy? How can you... you, of all people...?”

It was as if the shock of being ravaged by holy afflictions was more debilitating than the ravaging itself. Hendren dropped completely to his knees, throwing back his head. He did not even seem to notice the transcendent damage burning him from the inside out

“Lord!” he cried to the sky. “Why can you not speak to me in this forsaken place? Why did you send me here?”

“In case you hadn’t noticed,” Jason called out to him, “your lord is bit of a prick.”

He chanted out his spell to finish the job.

*“Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death.”*

Hendren didn’t acknowledge Jason or his words, dissolving into nothing under transcendent light, face still gazing at the sky.