

## Chapter 246

### Thadwick

Shade's passage through the cultist camp had been easier than anticipated. The camp was divided into three sections; the tents, which was his access point, was the largest section. It was where the bulk of both the iron-rankers were gathered. The crude buildings made with a stone-shaping power were areas he tried to avoid, as one of the bronze-rankers there might have been sharp enough to spot Shade. The very few buildings that looked like they were put together by a skilled craftsman he completely avoided.

The last thing he wanted was to run into a silver-ranker or, if Clive's guess was right, even the Builder itself. Clive knew more than most about great astral beings, even venerating one himself. That was how he knew that it was possible for them to occupy a human vessel, although the process was far from ethical.

Even listening to just around the iron-rankers of the camp, using Shade's body hidden in the shadows. Jason quickly confirmed Clive's suspicions, then extracted his perception from Shade. His actual body was on the ground floor of a large, intact building.

"It's like you said," Jason told Clive. "The Builder had taken a mortal vessel."

"I knew those were more than even a silver-ranker could stone-shape," Neil said.

"What's next?" Sophie asked.

"I'm going back there," Jason said.

"That's a mistake," Clive said. "If the Builder really is there, even in a mortal vessel, it's likely to find you sooner, rather than later. It may even be able to trace you through the familiar bond."

"So you mentioned earlier," Jason said. "I'd actually like to talk to you about that, Clive."

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Thadwick's cage was by the wall, moulded by a stone-shaping power from the brick underfoot. The process to prepare him to be the Builder's next vessel had given him strength in the upper reaches of bronze, so the bars were thick and reinforced with containment magic. Thadwick's essence powers were gone, so he had no collar.

The cage had been placed out of the way, behind a pile of damaged storage crates. The circumstances in which the cultists had arrived had been as savage on their supplies as it had on their members. The worthless and broken goods had been tossed aside in a

pile and Thadwick with them. Thadwick was sitting, head down, legs pulled up with his arms around them. Shade's incorporeal body slipped right through the bars, into a crouch.

"Hello, Thadwick," Jason greeted through his familiar. "It's been a while."

On hearing Jason's hated voice, Thadwick lifted his head. His hand snaked out to grab the shadowy figure by the throat, but passed straight through it.

"I'm not really here, Thadwick. I'm speaking through one of my familiar's projected bodies. Even if you could kill it, it would only cost me some mana to replace."

"You survived, then," Thadwick said bitterly. "We weren't sure if you would be able to stay alive in this place."

"I don't think anyone doubted it but you, Thadwick. This place has its dangers, but not so many that a good team of adventurers can't handle it. Neil says hello, by the way."

"I don't want to hear from that traitor."

"Wow," Jason said. "Your aura has changed more than mine, to the point I wasn't sure it was really you. But calling someone a traitor after you kicked him out of your team so you could sign up with an evil cult? That's you all over."

"And smugly looking down on others is you," Thadwick spat back.

"That's fair," Jason said. "We're both so far from that day we met in the marshalling yard, yet our flaws remain the same. That being said, I had something of a revelation in the time since we last met."

"And what's that?" Thadwick asked sceptically.

"That you and I are more similar than either of us would like."

"I am nothing like you!"

"Say it all you like, but it doesn't change anything. It's not like I can claim any credit for the differences that led you to be stuck in this cage, while I'm free to come and go. I just had the good fortune of having people who reined me in before I turned into you."

"You think you're so much better than me, don't you, Asano?"

Jason smiled sadly, shaking his head.

"Thadwick, everyone is better than you. You are literally the worst. You didn't just betray your family and the Adventure Society, although you most certainly did. These people you've thrown in with, they're the enemy of the whole world and everyone in it. You betrayed your entire world. You're worse than people who beat their children or rob and kill the elderly. You're worse than the cultists you've joined. They might follow some twisted, power-hungry ideology, but at least they act out of passion. They didn't just look at someone else causing death and destruction on a global scale and join in out of pique because the world didn't give them what they felt they were entitled to."

“You think you understand me?”

“Yes, Thadwick. Not to kick a man when he’s down, but you’re a bit simple.”

Thadwick lashed out again, his hand once more swiping harmlessly through Shade’s shadow body.

“Also, a little slow on the uptake,” Jason added.

“Screw you, Asano. You’ll never get out of this astral space alive.”

“Maybe,” Jason said. “If I die, though, I die as myself. While my familiar was poking around, I pieced together how you ended up in this cage. The Builder’s really here in person? Walking around inside some poor sap?”

“He is,” Thadwick said, the disdain in his voice pushed out by dread. “He used too much power building this camp and all but burned out his current vessel. The next poor sap is me.”

Thadwick’s eyes lit up with a spark of hope as his gaze on Jason’s familiar body grew intent.

“You can get me out!” Thadwick said. “I can help you. I’ve seen things. I know things. Things that can help you.”

“You’re probably right,” Jason said, “ but I can’t help you. This familiar’s body can’t break you out, or get you over the wall. I can’t even offer to put you out of your misery before the Builder takes you. All this body can do is drain mana.”

“You could come yourself, with your team. The things I know are worth the risk.”

“I’m not going to walk my team blind into a fortified position full of powerful enemies,” Jason said. “If nothing else, I don’t trust you. We could easily find the bad guys waiting for us because you warned them in hope of a reprieve.”

“I wouldn’t do that!”

“Yes, Thadwick, you would. If anything, it would be more of a surprise if you didn’t betray us.”

“I could start yelling, you know,” Thadwick said. “Let everyone know that you’re here in the camp.”

“They already know,” Jason said. “Oddly, they’ve been waiting for us to finish our conversation. I guess whatever they did to you dulled your senses. Or perhaps it’s just the old Thadwick obliviousness. You never did pay much attention to anything that wasn’t yourself.”

“I’m looking forward to hearing about your death,” Thadwick said.

“Even if it comes, Thadwick, you won’t be the one hearing about it. Very soon, someone else is going to be in possession of your ears.”

Thadwick's face paled at the thought. He bowed his head, looking down instead of at Jason.

"How is my family?" Thadwick asked softly.

"Your betrayal wasn't exactly good for them," Jason said. "It would have been worse if your mother hadn't picked up the city like a rug and shaken most of the cultists out. She was trying to rescue you, before everyone realised you went willingly. She was still trying after, for that matter. She took longer than the rest to believe it, though, your mum. I'm pretty sure she still thinks it was some implanted impulse that made you go back."

"Maybe it was," Thadwick said to the floor, his voice beaten and hollow. "It was the power. I could feel it, in the memories from the first time I had the seed. I still don't really remember the first time. You don't keep control, if they have to force it on you. I only had flashes, but I remembered the feeling of power. That was clear. The power I'd always been promised, but never seemed to receive."

He looked up, staring at Jason through Shade's body.

"That was the lie, wasn't it? The lure."

"Yes," Jason said softly.

"Please," Thadwick begged. "Please get me out of here."

"I'm sorry, Thadwick. Strangely, I really am. But you've dug a hole so deep that all you can do is wait for the sides to fall in. Anyone who jumps in will just get buried along with you."

"Please..."

The familiar body moved out of the cage and stood upright.

"Goodbye, Thadwick. The next time I see you, I don't think it will be you in there."

Shade walked out into the open, not bothering to hide as behind him, Thadwick started screaming his name, cursing him to the heavens. Zato was waiting nearby, cultists from around the camp looking over.

"You're the leader?" Jason asked.

"Zato," he introduced himself.

"Jason Asano. Thank you for being patient."

"We have both treated Thadwick poorly. Not undeservedly, but he still came to Builder willingly, in the end. I will not begrudge him a last conversation with the closest he can get to a friend, even if it is an enemy."

"I'm not sure if that was a kindness or not," Jason said.

Zato looked in the direction of the cage, where Thadwick was still screaming.

"Would you be willing to move to a more discreet location to talk?"

“Certainly,” Jason said. “I thank you for the civilised welcome.”

Zato led Jason across the camp, in the direction of the few small buildings that were truly well-constructed. There were cultists and constructs all over. Purity clergy as well, although Jason didn’t spot Hendren or Anisa. He quietly hoped he knew exactly where they were.

“Did the Builder knock these ones out personally?” Jason asked, gesturing to the better-made buildings they were headed towards.

“He did,” Zato said. “I’m taking you to our command residence.”

“Command residence,” Jason said. “I like that. It has a feel of dignity. I’d like to thank you for the civil welcome,” Jason said. “Thadwick’s an old, well, not friend, but... I can at least tell his mother that he had someone to talk to at the end.”

“We can hardly bring any harm to your familiar’s projected body, so why be barbarians about it? There’s nothing in the camp we need to hide from you. All you will find here is that you do not have the strength or the numbers to handle us.”

“It is intimidating,” Jason agreed, eyeing a large construct. It was similar to a beetle, with a hard body and six legs. The rather confronting difference was the neck, which was long, flexible and segmented, ending in what looked like a rhino’s head, but with a bladed fin instead of a horn. Jason could feel the faint aura of the construct, which was silver rank.

“Is that a construct version of a real creature?”

“Construct cores are variations on monster cores,” Zato said. “They create more powerful versions of ordinary monsters.”

Zato led them to what looked like a stone cottage and went inside, holding the door for Jason to follow. Inside was a surprisingly comfortable sitting room, replete with arm chairs, a couch and a nice rug on the floor.

“Not your cloud house, I’m sure,” Zato said, “but not bad, in a pinch. Please, sit.”

“Not much point,” Jason said. “My familiar is intangible, so I’d have to fake it. It’s very nice, though. It could maybe use some house plants.”

“The Lord Builder doesn’t care for them.”

“It’s his house, I guess.”

“Yes it is,” the Builder said, walking into the room. He emitted no trace of aura that Jason could sense.

Jason looked at the Builder, He was wearing plain robes with the hood pushed back, revealing a cadaverous face. Even so, it seemed familiar.

“Who’s the poor bloke you’re inside now?” Jason asked. “He looks kind of familiar, but I can’t place it. Probably because it looks like you’re going Weekend at Bernie’s on the poor guy.”

“Weekend at Bernie’s?” Zato asked. “I’m not sure I follow.”

“Asano likes to makes references people from this world will not understand,” the Builder said. “The purpose is to put them off balance. Pay it no mind.”

“You took possession of my brain for a little while,” Jason said. “It makes sense that you know all my tricks. You and the goddess of Knowledge should get together and play Mario Kart. Do gods and great astral beings socialise? I suppose you must, since Purity seems to fit neatly into your pocket.”

“He also likes to talk continuously, derailing the conversation,” the Builder said. “He moves it into his own pace that he might control it. The inside of his mind is an interminable place.”

“Don’t go spilling all the beans,” Jason said. “Forget about my head, though. What about this guy you’re inside of right now?”

“This vessel has encountered you before,” the Builder said. “While he was a servant at the Vane estate, he captured you. Twice.”

“Wait, he’s the shovel guy? Jason asked. “What was his name? I want to say... Dougie?”

“Dougall,” the Builder said.

“No, I’m pretty sure it was Dougie.”

“It was Dougall.”

“You might want to have another rummage around that head, mate. The bloke should know his own name.”

“You are attempting to aggravate me,” the Builder said.

“Mate, I’m doing that just by walking around. I’m a living monument to your failure. Why would I bother to try and tick you off even more?”

“Because you find it fun.”

Jason laughed. “You really were inside my head, weren’t you?”

“And now you are inside one of the Reaper’s brood,” the Builder said. “Why would one of the Reaper’s shadows stoop to involving itself in mortal affairs?”

“An oddly hypocritical criticism, coming from you,” Shade said. “I was ever my own being and am free to do as I wish.”

“You should have chosen a better summoner,” the Builder said. “This one will be dead, soon.”

“Perhaps,” Shade said. “He’s died before.”

“You seem confident,” Jason said to the Builder. “You think I can’t beat you?”

“We have the numbers and we have the power,” the Builder said. “Overcoming us is impossible for you.”

“So was kicking your interdimensional arse out of my body, yet here we are,” Jason said. “I’ve beaten you before and I’ll beat you again. I did say I’d have pants, next time, but my legs aren’t here, so this doesn’t count.”

“The reason I invited you,” Zato interjected, “was to discuss the possibility of mutually acceptable resolution.”

Zato had stepped back on the arrival of the Builder, but stepped forward when proceedings continued to remain contentious.

“You want a truce?” Jason asked.

“No one doubts that you can cause us some trouble,” Zato said. “It is equally evident, however, that you cannot, ultimately, stop us. Therefore, we suggest a compromise.”

“You can’t seriously think that we’d go for that?” Jason asked.

“This astral space, as I’m sure you are aware,” Zato said, “is quite unusual. The connection it has to the larger world is artificially supported. That means that we don’t need to destructively rip it away, as we have with other astral spaces. The controlled unravelling of the astral bindings will let it drift away without causing any harm.”

“So,” Jason said. “What you’re proposing is that we just let you have this one?”

“In return, we shall open a portal back to the world. We get the astral space, you and your team get out alive and we can go right back to fighting over the next thing. We can even throw in Thadwick, if you want him.”

“He’s not much of a sweetener,” Jason said. “I can’t make that decision. I’ll have to consult with my team.”

“Of course,” Zato said.

“Just so you know,” Jason said, “I’ll be voting to turn you down. And I do have my persuasive moments.”

“I would also like for you to decline,” the Builder said. “I would rather put you to death here, but Zato has convinced me of the merits of this proposal.”

“He does seem pretty on top of things,” Jason said. “Not what I look for in an enemy, to be honest. I actually kind of like him. I don’t suppose you want to join team Hopelessly Outmatched, Zato?”

“No, thank you.”

“I don’t blame you, mate. Is Zato your first name or last name?”

“It’s my only name.”

“Oh, a mononym,” Jason said brightly. “Like Cher. Have your boss tell you about the music video for If I could Turn back Time. That could be a good look for you. Bold, but I think you could swing it.”

Jason looked at the Builder’s expression.

“Ooh, I think he’d getting grouchy,” Jason said. “I’d best make myself scarce before he changes his mind on the whole deal.”

“Best that you do,” the Builder warned.

“I’m just going to have Shade dissolve his body here,” Jason said. “Wouldn’t want you following me home.”

“Please give my proposal consideration, Mr Asano,” Zato said. “I would rather come out of this with a respected enemy than a vanquished foe.”

Shade’s body faded into nothingness.

“Do you think he believed me?” Zato asked.

“No,” the Builder said, “but it doesn’t matter. Our people are almost upon them.”

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Jason opened his eyes and turned to Shade.

“How long?” Jason asked.

“They are less than two minutes out.”

Shade had two of his bodies stationed between their location and the Builder camp.

Jason tossed his aura senses over the dummy auras Clive had set up. They were subtle and impressively close to the originals. Given that the enemies hadn’t sensed their current auras, they should be completely indistinguishable from the reality.

Jason started running. He had been looking and speaking through Shade from the bottom of a large, intact building; exactly the kind of building that would make a good encampment. He extricated himself from the building and looked up, spotting one of Shade’s bodies on the roof of the adjacent building.

He quickly teleported through a chain of Shade’s bodies to where the team was waiting on a rooftop, several buildings away. That brought him to the rest of the team, several buildings away and inside an aura suppression ritual circle Clive had set up.

“Well?” Neil asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Clive was right. The Builder was able to track me through the link to Shade’s body.”

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The contingent was a mix of clergy and cultist, made up of the fastest-moving people they'd been able to muster. They poured into the building, eager to find and cut down Asano before he fled, hopefully catching the rest of his team in the process. They arrived in the bowels of the building, pulling up short when they reached the complex ritual circle that was the source of the auras they had locked on to.

"What is this?" a priestess demanded, as Timos, the leader of the cultists' contingent went wide-eyed.

"We need to get out!"

Even as he yelled, their magical senses picked up previously dormant power coming to life around the building.

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The team reached the adjacent rooftop just in time to see the end of the building's collapse. They were swamped by a dust cloud, Sophie's aura once again keeping the team's air clear.

They dropped down to ground level, Jason sharing his slow fall power with Belinda and Neil. With Sophie's aura continuously clearing the air around them, they went to check on the unstable rubble.

"That's it, isn't it?" Belinda asked. "That has to have killed them, right?"

"Depends on who they sent," Humphrey said.

They were only just beginning their examination when they heard the rubble shifting in the cloud of dust ahead of them. Slowly, something pushed its way up and out, broken chunks of masonry tumbling away as it rose up from the debris. Through the haze, they saw a dome of magical force ascend from the shattered remnants of the building. Inside were three figures, who spotted them, in turn.

Jason had never seen Timos before and didn't recognise him. The other two he did: Anisa and her archbishop, Nicolas Hendren.