

## Chapter 259

### Clive Takes Charge

Clive led the way through the portal, followed by Neil and then the familiars. Belinda and Sophie were atop Onslow, Sophie still unconscious and Belinda not much better off. Humphrey had insisted on bringing up the rear, despite remaining on his feet only with the assistance of Stash, who had replicated Humphrey's own form to provide a supporting shoulder.

They emerged in the ruins of the ancient village under the lake, the water held off by the magical dome maintained by Emir's people. There were numerous tables set up with magical paraphernalia, from the months of study the portal had undergone both before and after the team had gone through it.

There were no people present, until a sleepy-looking man emerged from one of the semi-intact buildings.

"Hester," he said, rubbing a face over bleary eyes. "I hope you remembered to bring the..."

He stopped dead still, realising the sounds that had roused him from his nap were not that of a supply run. He was suddenly very awake, his eyes pivoting from the team to the open portal arch they had just come through.

As he stood there looking stupid, Clive was already moving. Throwing a glance over the magical tools arrayed on the benches, he snatched up three small crystals in one hand while using the other to draw a magic circle in the air. It was vertical, placed between himself and the portal. As soon as it was complete, he threw the crystals through it one after the other. The first lit up with a blue-grey light before passing into the portal, the second an amber light and the third a cool silver light.

"What is it?" Humphrey asked, limping over.

"I suspected that opening the portal this way would eliminate the rank-gating, which I have just proven," Clive said. "We need to get the strongest adventurers we can get in short order and go back for Jason."

"We can't be sure where Emir and the Remores are," Humphrey said. "My family estate always has silver-rankers on site."

Clive didn't pause to discuss, pointing a finger at the ground. He moved it around in a large circle and runes appeared to form a ring in response. When the rune circle was complete, a portal shimmered to life in the middle of it. Clive stepped through, Humphrey managing to follow under his own steam.

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The Builder landed on its feet, dropping to a crouch as Asano's body crunched into the ground nearby. It felt the magic of the tower complete its transition, the cascade of power that had been flowing into the world engineers now irreversibly inverted. The giant golems were nothing more than power sources for the portals, now.

The Builder did not fume with rage. It was older than the species of creatures it could sense scrambling around at the top of the tower, begrudging them neither their resistance nor their success. They were fighting for their lives and their world and the Builder had weathered setbacks before. This was but a battle in a world-spanning war.

It turned to Asano, who did raise the Builder's ire. It could weather the failure of its minions but the Builder and Asano had clashed directly, will to will. Its inability to force Asano into capitulation before the star seed gave out had been the Builder's personal failure and Asano still needed to be put in his place.

Asano was dead but that did not have to be the end. The astral space had no god of death to guide the soul into the astral; it would have to slowly drift into the Reaper's grasp on its own. That gave the Builder a window to act.

As it considered this, Asano's combat robe vanished. A glow lit up from within his body, which started radiating heat. The Builder felt the surge of a familiar power and was filled with a fury that no mortal, even one as frustrating as Asano, could engender.

"World-Phoenix."

The Builder abandoned its vessel which fell to the ground, an abandoned puppet.

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Along with the permanent guard contingent, the guards of the Geller Estate included elites from the family itself. Basic duties were a core part of the Geller training ethos, teaching both diligence and humility. Humphrey had spent time guarding the estate, as had his mother before him, and he would be assigned to do so again in the future.

When Clive's portal appeared in the atrium of the Geller Estate's main house, the two Geller family guards went on alert. Clive heard this as he stepped through the portal, glanced around and found the pair of bronze-rankers pointing weapons at him inadequate to his needs. Humphrey followed him out of the portal and waved down the guards.

"Young Master Humphrey!"

Clive casually fired a blast from his staff into the high ceiling. It left spiderweb cracks in the magically-reinforced glass of the atrium skylight, but it was the secondary effect he had wanted to trigger. Sounds of alarm rang out around the estate.

Humphrey's sister, Henrietta, had been on guard duty outside and rushed in with the first wave of respondents, spotting Humphrey.

"Hump!"

She didn't get the chance to talk as more people poured in, both guards and Geller family members, ready to fight. Humphrey and Henrietta were trying to calm things down when Danielle arrived in a blur, her conjured dimensional blade ready at hand. Her eyes went wide on seeing her son.

In the midst of the commotion, Clive's voice cut over the noise, its fierce and commanding timbre startling those who knew him.

"Lady Geller," he barked. "Gather the strongest force you can immediately muster and teleport them to the portal arch under the lake."

Not waiting for a response, Clive stepped back through the portal, completely disregarding the chaos left in his wake.

Humphrey looked between his mother and the portal.

"What he said," Humphrey added. "Seconds matter."

He followed Clive back through the portal. As the passage of four bronze-rankers was the limit of Clive's portal, it closed behind him.

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The ghoul had no memory. It barely had a sense of self at all. Its body was still strong but it felt weak. It knew it should be much stronger. It knew that it was dying. More than anything else, it knew hunger.

Hunger was the ghoul's identity. Hunger was its purpose. It opened its eyes and pushed itself to its feet. There was a body on the ground, rich with power but burning with a heat it that every instinct told it to run from. Run it did, feeling the magic around it, looking for sustenance.

There was much activity, but the ghoul paid it no mind. It cared only for magic that it could feed on, which was not present within the teeming throng fighting around it. Empty vessels made of stone and false souls in bodies filled with worthless magic were of no use to it. The only true souls were tainted and poisoned.

Spreading its senses further, it detected pristine souls far above it. It turned its gaze upward, only for those souls to vanish, one by one. The ghoul let out a roar of frustration.

"Lord Builder?"

The ghoul turned to face the person talking at it. It was one of the worthless, tainted souls.

"No," the tainted soul. "Thadwick?"

Some murky thought fought its way clear of the hunger consuming the ghoul's mind. This tainted soul's name was Timos. It didn't matter, since it could not sate the ghoul's hunger. The tainted soul scrambled away and the ghoul let it go. It was neither obstacle nor sustenance, leaving the ghoul's mind the moment it was out of sight.

The ghoul picked up on something else. Something distant but rich and incredibly potent. Even far away it could smell it. It set out at a loping run. None of the things around it challenged it, rather scrambling to get out of its path.

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Clive paced back and forth in front of the portal as he waited, the passage of every second an interminable wait. Danielle had mustered a small army of bronze-rankers, who appeared around the portal arch. She had also dragged along another silver-ranker, her husband, Keith. She took in the open portal, the bedraggled state of the team and immediately spotted the absence.

"Where's Jason?"

"He held back the Builder so we could get clear," Clive said, already striding toward the arch. "The rank-gate on the portal is gone. Follow me."

Neil moved into step with Clive and they went back through the arch. Humphrey was the only other team member with the mobility to go, but held back, face filled with anguish. He knew he would be more liability than asset until the after-effects of the potions he had taken passed and he could replenish his mana and stamina.

Danielle threw him a glance, seeing his nod before leading her people through after Clive. Henrietta approached Humphrey as the others passed through the portal.

"What happened to Clive?" she asked.

"The same thing that happened to all of us," Humphrey said darkly.

The Geller force emerged on the tower top from the rigged portal Clive had set up for the team's escape. The tower was some thirty storeys high, further up than any of them had expected and higher than most of them had ever been.

Clive had already reached the edge of the tower drawing out a magic circle with one hand as he perused a book held in the other. While his spirit attribute reaching bronze had a positive effect on his already prodigious memory, there were far more rituals than he could ever memorise. This included the slow-fall ritual he drew out, which took the form of a floating ring as it was completed, hovering off the edge of the tower.

"Everyone who doesn't have a flight or slow-fall power, use this," he announced to the group, then leapt off the tower and through the ring. Neil didn't hesitate to follow.

Danielle rushed to the edge of the tower, looking down. At the base of the tower was a wild battle of constructs and macabrely altered people, akin to those she had fought in the desert astral space. It was all contained within a wall that ringed the tower.

Her people followed, with her husband joining her at the edge of the tower.

“There are silver-rank monsters down there,” her husband said, prompting her for direction. “What did we send our boy into?”

“Let’s go find out,” she announced loudly, then jumped through Clive’s magic ring.

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An unattended soul was a greater bounty than the ghoul could ever have expected, let alone one so powerful. It floated around a sword in a block of crystal that the ghoul ignored, interested only in the transcendent light of the soul. It plunged itself into that light, which soaked into it like rain on desert earth, sating an insatiable hunger and bringing forth a grand transfiguration.

The ghoul’s ruined body was not just replenished but transformed, bursting with strength and saturated with magic. Even so, the miraculous effect on its body paled in comparison to the changes affected on its soul.

The Builder’s power had hollowed out Thadwick’s soul like a termite colony in a rotten log. What remained was an empty shell, broken and helpless. Feasting on that powerful soul instigated a powerful change, making whole what first the star seed and then the Builder itself had ruptured.

It was not a restoration of the soul. The result was not Thadwick; not as he had been. It was a new beast, something powerful and voracious. The wreckage of Thadwick’s body, mind and soul was the foundation from which it built itself. The body and soul were reconstituted, the brain still holding Thadwick’s memories. It also held a few scattered fragments left behind by the Builder’s alien and unfathomable mind.

As the last of the soul was consumed, the object it had been encapsulating remained. On a plain, stone plinth was a sinister black and red sword, encased in crystal. As the last skerrick of soul vanished, tiny cracks started appearing in the crystal, glowing red and leaking wisps of black smoke.

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The intervention of the Geller force eventually brought the wild chaos to order. Danielle dispatched people to open the gates and give an outlet for the frenzied monsters to stampede out of. The blank-faced converted that had once been Purity priests were now macabre monstrosities and were cut down, while the cult’s constructs were shattered to

pieces. There were no surviving cultists, all either dead or fled by the time the Geller's arrived.

Danielle went over to where Clive and Neil were standing, numb, some distance from Jason's body. There was no question of its state, with death offering no dignity. The fall had been unkind, as had the stone spikes impaling his body.

They could not get close, even to cover the body, because of an intense heat radiating from it. It was lit up with an internal glow, as if a fire were burning inside it. Bizarrely, it even affected Henrietta, whose fire essence gave her a power that should have shielded her from heat strong enough to melt stone.

"Any sign of the Builder?" Clive asked, not looking away from Jason. He was a little too close, the heat leaving his face glistening with sweat, but he didn't move.

"No," Danielle said. "You said he's in Thadwick's body?"

"Yes," Neil said. "We only saw him briefly, though, and he was barely recognisable. I think the Builder's power left him more dead than alive."

"If he's here, we'll find him," Danielle said. "How stable is that portal, Clive?"

"Intractable," Clive said. "It would be harder to close than it was to open."

"Don't let your people just run off exploring, though," Neil said. "This place has dangerous secrets, and the monsters have grown stronger."

"What is that fire?" Clive wondered aloud, eyes still locked on Jason's corpse. "Did the Builder do something to Jason's soul?"

"We'll figure it out," Neil said, moving closer to put a hand on Clive's shoulder. "We won't let this stand. We'll find a way to..."

Neil trailed off as wispy, rainbow smoke started rising up from Jason's body, which dissolved away completely in short order. All that remained was a horrid stench and the lingering heat.

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With the dissolution of Jason's body, there was nothing else binding the team to the astral space and they were portalled back to Greenstone. In the wake of the astral space being opened, the site of the portal arch below the lake became a hub of activity, even more than when Emir, Clive and his people were trying to open it. The astral space was a realm of dangers and opportunities to be explored.

A few days after the portal had opened, more people arrived at the bottom of the lake to find everyone there dead. Especially concerting was that there were two silver-rankers among the fallen. In response, the three gold-rankers present in the city were dispatched to investigate.

Emir arrived, along with Rufus Remore's parents, Gabriel and Arabelle. The pair had remained in Greenstone to help Rufus launch the Remore Academy Training Annex. The last member of their old team, Cal, had departed Greenstone months earlier.

"Have you ever seen bodies like this?" Emir asked Arabelle. She was a healer and more familiar with various forms of death than the other two. The corpses looked normal to ordinary vision, but to magical senses they seemed desiccated and drained, so bereft of magic that they were like holes in the ambient magic around them.

"Energy vampire," Arabelle said. "A strong one."

"I'll talk to Hester about portalling Cal back here," Emir said. "We're going to need him if we're going to hunt this thing."