

Chapter 264

Beyond Our Ability to Control

The Adventure Society and the Magic Society had both sent people flooding into the astral space. For the Adventure Society, it was a precious chance to rapidly advance some of their more promising members. It was currently ideal for skilled bronze-rankers and even freshly ranked-up silvers to advance their abilities. For the Magic Society, it was a chance to get a handle on the advanced astral magic the Builder's cult had been wielding. For both, it was a chance to prepare for the battle against the Builder's forces still escalating around the world.

Once again working for the Magic Society, Clive's first task was to return to the astral space from which he had recently emerged. It would only remain accessible for a limited time, but now the limitations of rank were removed from entry, it was a treasure trove of knowledge and opportunity. It was also a treasure trove of actual treasure, but that was the Adventure Society's area.

Clive had not revealed the materials that Knowledge had given first to Jason and then to him. He implicitly understood that the goddess had already been pushing boundaries. That said, any of it he could link to what they found in the astral space, he did so immediately.

He attributed any suspicious leaps of insight to having studied the Builder's magic during his previous time in the astral space. It wasn't exactly a lie. To the best of his understanding, the information Knowledge had given them was taken from the Builder's people. It was also true that Clive had studied materials they had taken from the Builder cult's two camp sites.

The cult's original arrival site had a building apparently occupied by the cult's ritualists and containing much of the material handed over by Knowledge. That freed up Clive's ability to share the information and eased his scruples. He abhorred the idea of being credited for magical breakthroughs he did not actually make himself.

Atop one of the portal towers at the edge of the city, Clive was explaining some of the magic involved with the portal arches, although the tower arches were still inactive. His audience was a group of Magic Society astral magic scholars who had portalled in to Greenstone from far and wide. Information that would help them stop the Builder from seizing more astral spaces was currently the world's most precious commodity. Any doubts the assemblage held about Clive's capabilities as a provincial scholar had been quickly expelled by his expertise.

The group were protected from the dangers of the astral space by a contingent of Adventure Society members, led by a silver-ranker and including Clive's own team. Although they would each be following different pursuits in the near future, for the moment they followed him into the astral space. Despite the assurances of the Adventure Society that they would all be kept safe, the team would not be dislodged. They were not going to lose another member to that place.

Of Clive's team, only Belinda had joined the Magic Society people in listening to Clive's lecture. The rest of the adventures were placed around the edge of the tower. These were not Greenstone locals but more capable imports; part of a much larger group brought in for the exploration of the astral space.

Only the most elite of Greenstone's own adventurers had even been allowed to participate. This was a small handful of bronze-rankers, including Henrietta Geller and Cassandra Mercer, both of whom were edging up on silver-rank. Beth Cavendish and her team had reached bronze-rank while Humphrey's team were in the astral space, although they were not as advanced as Humphrey and the others. Months in the pressure-cooker of the astral space had allowed them to leapfrog their peers.

Humphrey stood right at the edge of the tower, eyes panning from the water stretching out to the horizon and back to the city. Experienced eyes picked out the potential approach points of the familiar buildings of the crumbling brick, struggling under fecund jungle. Next to him was the silver-ranker, a man with wild dark hair named Pranesh.

"You don't need to be so vigilant," Pranesh said.

"If you don't respect this place, it will kill you," Humphrey said.

"The Builder's vessel is gone and we mopped up what was left of his people," Pranesh said. "All that's left are monsters."

"This place keeps dangerous secrets," Humphrey said. "I'm not so foolish as to think we found them all."

"Don't bother trying to tempt my little brother into slacking off," Henrietta said, walking over to them. "They train all us Gellers, but Humphrey is the measuring stick, now. He always embodied the training, but now he's been through the fire. He's exactly the adventurer we're trying to make."

"You're exaggerating, Henri," Humphrey said.

"See? Modesty. Just like good little Geller boy."

Nearby, Sophie was glancing back at Belinda, seeing her engrossed in Clive's impromptu lecture. She wandered over to stand next to her friend, giving Belinda a

companionable shoulder bump. Belinda flashed her a smile before returning her gaze back to Clive.

“You should do it,” Sophie said quietly.

Clive had asked Belinda to resume her previous position as his research assistant. Since that meant separating from Sophie, if only temporarily, she had declined the offer.

“You’re going to go off with Emir, looking for your family,” Belinda said. “A family who, as best anyone can tell, are some kind of ancient order of murderers. How can I leave you alone for that?”

Sophie glanced back at Humphrey and Neil. Humphrey was his usual, diligent self. Neil had his legs hanging off the edge of the tower, Cassandra Mercer sitting next to him as they chatted quietly.

“I won’t be alone,” Sophie said. “It’s not just you and me anymore.”

“You’re saying that there’s no way to stabilise the portal and maintain access to the astral space?” Lorelei asked. She, along with the other Magic Society members, were still struggling to get their heads around the astral magic concepts Clive was explaining.

“Maintaining a stable portal isn’t the issue,” Clive said, patting the portal arch he was standing next to. “This isn’t an astral space, in the traditional sense. It’s a vehicle. A transcendent-rank vehicle in the shape of an astral space. A vehicle that is now slowly pulling away from our world, which is beyond our ability to control.”

“Why is it pulling away?” Lorelei asked.

Lorelei was a fair-skinned woman with blonde hair. The beautifying effect of her bronze rank hadn’t made her as radiant as someone like Sophie, but she still had the healthy, athletic look of a magically idealised body. The effects on the body of ranking up were more pronounced on those who didn’t already have the looks and physique of a Humphrey or a Sophie. For them it was akin to polishing an already stunning gemstone, rather than carving a beautiful sculpture from a mundane rock.

“The Builder was taking control of this place,” Clive said. “Only a being of his level could actually do so, but we were lucky. The limits of his vessel meant that he still required an intermediary control, namely, the tower now standing in the centre of the astral space.”

All eyes turned as Clive gestured. From their position on their own tower, they could see the central tower even from the edge of the city. The thirty storey edifice was the tallest building in the astral space by a factor of six.

“As you all saw descending the tower after your arrival,” Clive said, “It isn’t a building in the traditional sense. Only the bottom floors have space for occupation, and even they only have doorways with no doors.”

They had all arrived at the astral space through the portal Clive had appropriated from a tower like the one on which they stood. Since then, he had done a more thorough job of keeping it open, compared to the rushed connection they had made on their initial escape.

“When the Builder started taking control of this place,” Clive said. “We had no means to seize that control. The best we could do was interfere with his intermediary mechanism, the central tower, inverting the considerable energies involved. This causing the vehicle to draw away from our world instead of breaching it. Using the towers the Order of the Reaper built around the Builder’s giant golems was just a bonus, as was siphoning off enough power to fuel a portal. If the dimensional forces involved hadn’t been just right, and if the Order of the Reaper hadn’t designed these portals to use the golems as a power source, then my team and I would have died without ever escaping this place. Frankly, I’m amazed that it worked at all; I really hadn’t expected it to.”

“You never told us that!” Neil called out from behind the assembled Magic Society people.

“What good would that have done?” Clive asked him.

“I could have played the odds,” Neil said. “Thrown in with the Builder and sold the rest of you out.”

The assembled strangers looked at Neil with shocked disbelief, as did Cassandra, standing next to him. His team just shook their heads.

Pranesh was the first to detect the approaching adventurers with his silver-rank senses. They were bronze-rank, moving fast, with auras flecked with panic. Then he sensed the wave of monsters following after them.

“Idiots,” he muttered shaking his head. The point of not using the locals was to avoid stupid mistakes.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“It looks like the patrol team ran into one of those monster packs still roaming around,” Pranesh said. “They’ve led it right back here.”

“I though you people were meant to be the good adventurers,” Neil said, overhearing.

“We were,” Pranesh said, then called out for the group’s attention and explained the imminent situation.

“There is a wave of monsters heading this way. From the proportions I’m sensing, two-thirds of the pack are bronze-rank and the rest are silver. As for absolute numbers, I’m not sure, but it’s a lot. Adventurers, gather on me. Magic Society people, gather at the centre of the tower. Unless the pack had flyers amongst them, we’ll make sure the fighting doesn’t get near you.”

Clive left the scholars to join his team, lining up at the edge of the tower. Lorelei followed, looking concerned.

“You don’t have to fight,” she assured him.

“You don’t get it,” Neil said. “We’re here to kick ass and chew bubblegum, and we never actually found out what bubblegum was.”

“You have gotten so weird,” Cassandra told Neil. “You used to be the sensible one. You’re a lot more like Jason, now.”

“I think he always was,” Humphrey said as he conjured his dragon armour and giant wing sword. “He just never had the chance to be himself when he had your brother to deal with. Too much responsibility and too few people to rely on. Now he can afford to let himself loose a little.”

“I think he may have gotten a little too loose,” Cassandra said.

“You know I’m still right here,” Neil said. “You’re talking about me like I’m a child with behaviour problems.”

“Can’t imagine why,” Sophie said.

They lined up on the edge of the tower as their senses began to pick up the oncoming monsters.

“This is good,” Sophie said. “I haven’t killed a monster in more than a week and it was starting to feel weird.”

“This monster train is what we did to the Builder cult,” Belinda said. “You don’t suppose this is some leftover cult people getting their own back?”

“I hope so,” Sophie said. “I never got the chance to thank them as thoroughly as I wanted to.”

“I’ve never faced this many monsters before,” Cassandra said. Neil reached out and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Don’t worry,” he told her. “This is what we do.”

The adventurers confronting the monster wave were caught up in a sprawling pitched battle that filled the overgrown streets and spread into the ruined buildings. The monsters held a massive advantage in numbers as well as rank, with numerous silver-rankers

amongst them. There were no second-rate adventurers present, however, only elites. They were not overwhelmed, many of the bronze-rankers able to go one-on-one against the silver-rank monsters, although there was no such thing as a clean fight amongst the chaos.

The only silver-rank adventurer, Pranesh, was a literal dervish of swords. Surrounded by conjured swords, they whirled around him like a dust devil of steel, carving a path through the battlefield. He served as a pressure valve for the adventurers, stepping in when fights got too hairy.

The ranged attackers, like Clive, had prime position atop the high tower. Clive himself had set up a row of ritual circles to empower the ranged attackers standing on them. He had added further circles floating at the end of his weapons as he blasted away with his wand and staff. Next to him was Emily, the celestine archer from Beth Cavendish's team. Her gold hair was trimmed short in a practical pixie cut, leaving nothing to fall in her face as her eyes darts back and forth over the battlefield.

With a racial gift evolution that gave her the human aptitude for special attacks, she was conjuring magical arrows by the multitude and raining them down on the monsters. The power to conjure her deadly Reaper's Bow had been bestowed by the awakening stone of the Reaper she earned in the trials. Her myriad essence gave her an array of powerful attacks that combined deadly precision with area attacks. Her gathering and onslaught essences were less discriminate, with powerful charge attacks and arrows imbued with potent explosive magic.

On the ground, the other adventures confronted the monsters directly. Beth and Humphrey's team worked together, joined by Cassandra and Henrietta. The pair's own teams had, like them, returned to their homelands in readiness for the monster surge that still refused to arrive.

The shardstorm pangolin was a silver-rank monster that could send steel-hard and razor-sharp scales flying from its body, then control them telekinetically to create a storm of blades. The effect was not unlike Pranesh and his sword dervish, but the scales-blades were smaller and far more numerous. A trio of the pangolins were overlapping their blade zones, creating an obscuring cloud of biting teeth.

The shifting blade wall was thick enough that even attacks were being absorbed, the hardy scales deflecting physical projectiles and absorbing magic. With multiple monsters in the same space, even area effects weren't breaking through.

Sophie had learned important lessons from her battles in the astral space. The biggest one was that avoiding attacks would only get her so far if she did so little damage

that the enemy could ignore her and go after her team. It was the hard-fought battles against silver-rank enemies that had taught her how to ramp up her damage, if the enemies were up to the task.

She dashed into the middle of the blade storm, knowing that just few seconds of exposure would tear her to ribbons. She activated her Moment of Oneness power, absorbing all damage she took for two seconds, after which she had four more seconds to deliver that damage against an opponent in an attack or suffer it all retroactively.

The scale blades blasted her like rain in a hurricane, even as she pushed through the dense cloud at speed. Her scant seconds of protection ended before she could break through and for a fleeting moment, was subject to the full fury of the blades. They slashed open her armour and flesh alike, leaving her cut and bloody in an instant.

It was only a moment before she reached the eye of the storm, close enough to the monsters that they would not risk cutting themselves with their wild blades. Their control was crude, so they gave themselves a comfortable margin, especially with three together combining efforts.

It had only been a single moment that Sophie was subjected to the razor cloud, but it was enough to leave her a ragged, bloody wreck. Her expensive, bronze-rank armour was in tatters, while the flesh under it had fared little better. By the time she reached the pangolins, she was painted red in her own blood, her silver hair looking like a sword bloodied in battle.

The weakness of the stormshard pangolin was that in casting off its scales, it was left vulnerable to anything that made it past the blade wall. Only the head retained scales and Sophie could have ignored it to go for the exposed body, but she didn't. A bloody fist landed on the long face of the middle pangolin.

Sophie had been subjected to countless attacks from the blades, immediately pushing her Karmic Warrior ability to its limits. The damage reduction it gave her was the only reason she was still standing after making it through the blades, bloody and ragged as she was. The real reason she subjected herself to such suffering, though, was the ramping increase the ability gave to her power and spirit attributes.

With the ability pushed to its maximum, her power and spirit attributes now rivalled a silver-ranker, giving her a spirit-coin-like boost without the short duration or the backlash.

Sophie didn't just release the damage absorbed by her Moment of Oneness power in the punch she landed on the pangolin. She also unleashed her counter-execute, Deny the Reaper. The effect of the ability was massively inflated by her severely injured state.

Sophie's ability was enhanced as Neil sent her a Bolster power from somewhere else in the battlefield, flooding her with power. The healer's ability to monitor a sprawling battle and pick the perfect moment for his abilities had been refined by their experiences in the astral space. His timing was now sharper than the scale-blades of the pangolins.

The result of these cumulative effects coming together in Sophie's fist was an explosion of damage, no small part of which was transcendent, right into the creature's skull.

Sophie's Boundary Breaker power eliminated the damage reduction from rank disparity, and the transcendent damage would have ignored it anyway. Even so, silver-rank was silver-rank and the monster didn't die. Sufficient damage from a single strike to inflict sufficiently massive head trauma have a monster fall comatose would be startling enough from a silver-ranker, let alone a bronze. That it was a defence specialist rather than an attacker was all the more startling.

Sophie was recovering fast with the massive burst of immediate healing from her counter-execute, which also left behind a potent heal over time effect. Added to the healing from her Karmic Warrior ability, it left her in a far better state than her bloody visage and ragged armour would suggest. The other two pangolins were looking at her, standing beside their unconscious companion.

Even ramped up to the maximum, Sophie could only do so much damage on an ongoing basis. The kind of massive damage attack she just unleashed took specific circumstances and the use of abilities now on cooldown. She was undeterred, since all she needed was to raise her damage from a low range to a moderate one. If she couldn't attack hard, she would just attack fast enough to make up the difference.

It had only been a few moments in which she had rushed through their defence wall to attack the pangolins. They had sensed her presence, but never imagined the bronze-ranker charging through their barrier to attack, allowing her to blindside them. They had not reacted by the time the first of the number was felled and Sophie activated her Eternal Moment power before they could.

Time seemed to stop for her and she started racking up wind blades that froze as soon as she unleashed them. With her amplified spirit attribute, each was much more potent than normal. When she rejoined the normal flow of time, the blades gouged their way into the exposed flesh of one of the remaining pangolins.

Both monsters recalled their scales to protect their bodies, cancelling the blade storm. In the case of the injured one, blood from Sophie's wind blade attacks seeped out from between the scales. It immediately fled and Sophie let it go, turning to the other. It

reoriented the scales on its body to cover itself in blades, then curled into a ball and rolled at Sophie.

Such a charge attack would have been too slow to hit her even if it had time to gather momentum, which it hadn't. The simple reality was that without the blade wall, the pangolin was far less of a threat. The largest part of this was that other adventurers were no longer held at bay, allowing them to move in on the beleaguered monsters.

In the aftermath of the battle, Pranesh and Humphrey stood atop the tower once more, watching as adventurers looted the sea of monster corpses, sending plumes of rainbow smoke into the air. Neil alone had covered most of the battle in his aura, which allowed him to loot the creatures within. Since he lacked a personal storage space, he wasn't able to embezzle, making him a popular source of looting in spite of two others with looting powers. The spoils were collected up to be disseminated later.

"Your guardian doesn't fight like a guardian," Pranesh said to Humphrey.

"She's always fought against anyone telling her what to do," Humphrey said. "Even her own power set. If she wants to attack, gods help anyone who tries to stop her."

"You need to get her to fight less recklessly," Pranesh said.

"She's fought hard to realise that she's strongest when walking on a knife edge," Humphrey said. "I won't tell her to throw away everything she's gained."

Pranesh frowned, but didn't try to convince Humphrey further. Humphrey frowned in turn. His secondary power evolution was a sacrifice power and he empathised with Sophie's bloody dedication. He had been forbidden from talking about that in no uncertain terms, both by his mother and a startling high-level Magic Society official. Humphrey and the rest of his team had all been sworn to secrecy.

"You've got the look of someone thinking about doing something for my own good," Humphrey said. "If you make the mistake of trying to interfere with my team, it will go very badly for you."

"Are you threatening me, Young Master Geller?" Pranesh asked.

"You're damn right I am."

Neil finished healing up Sophie. Belinda conjured up a privacy screen with her power to create simple objects and she pulled off what was left of her armour. It was the only thing intact enough to stay on her, the rest of the ragged clothes falling away. She slung the bloodied armour over the privacy screen.

“That’s going to take all day to self-repair,” she said as she tipped a bottle of crystal wash over her head. She tipped the last of it over the armour before pulling on a fresh set of clothes supplied from Belinda’s storage space, handed over the top of the screen. She looked at the empty bottle of crystal wash, remembering the man who loved it more than anyone. The bottle shattered in her fist, drawing fresh blood.