

## Chapter 224

### Fate Can't Wait to Kill Us All

The astral space was an island city of ancient stone buildings, reclaimed by jungle. Broad boulevards were covered in vines, grass growing up between displaced pavers. Buildings that were three, four, even five storeys tall, ranging from nearly intact to little more than rubble strewn around the lush, verdant greenery. Strange, magical plants could be seen. Bulbous, purple growths, adhering to the sides of buildings. Huge, towering trees, incongruent with the jungle around them. They stretched up, higher than any of the buildings, clutching at the sky with leafy fingers.

As they had in their initial foray into the city, the team had arrived on one of the portal towers that ringed the outer edge of the city. Situated where the island shore met the water, each tower had an archway akin to the one through which they had arrived. Their's was still open, an obsidian arch filled with dark energy. There was something eerie about the power within it. Not a mere absence of light, but a void that sought to devour it.

Jason's power allowed ten travellers before the power was expended. It remained active, only seven having passed through, including Stash. Perched on Humphrey's head in the form of a small bird, Stash was bobbing his head around with curiosity. The transit did not seem to have impacted the little dragon at all.

"So, who built this city?" Neil asked. "I mean, did this used to be a chunk of world, like the ones the Builder keeps tearing off? Or did someone come along and build this huge city in this astral space? Was is that order of assassins?"

"It was not," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow. "This city was as you see it when the Order of the Reaper first discovered this place and began working to stabilise it. Even these towers, which were used to connect it to your world, were already in place, waiting to be used."

"They were already here?" Clive asked. "We've been postulating that the primary function of the towers was to serve as the connection to our world. If they predate the people who used them that way, then it suggests that this astral space was attached to another reality in the past, or perhaps to ours and was severed somehow. Oh, that's fascinating."

"Fascination is a luxury for later," Humphrey said. "What matters is the Builder cult."

"That may be what I'm talking about," Clive said. "We already know that the cult has access to astral magic that makes our own look like a child's sand drawings. What we're talking about, with this astral space, is reality engineering. The Builder is the greatest

reality engineer is existence and beyond. Is the Builder trying to claim this astral space, or reclaim it? Where did the Order of the Reaper get the knowledge to do what they did here? It wasn't from our world."

"Are you suggesting that the Order of the Reaper, or perhaps even the Reaper itself, somehow stole this astral space from the Builder?" Jason asked.

"I wouldn't engage in that kind of postulation without significantly more to go on," Clive said. "I need to examine this tower, quite thoroughly."

"Not yet," Belinda reminded Clive. "The portal, first."

"Right, yes."

Belinda still served as Clive's on and off research assistant, although the stipend that earned her was inconsequential, relative to adventuring money. She had proven good for Clive, as she was very detail oriented, while he liked to careen from one big idea to the next.

His previous assistants had never been able to meet Clive's standards, leading to clashes and problems. There were reasons he had never advanced beyond Greenstone in spite of his talent. Belinda helped him bring ideas to fruition instead of getting bogged down in the details he had been dismissive of, while she found, in Clive, an enthusiastic magical tutor. As Jason well knew, Clive was downright ebullient when it came to sharing the study of magic.

Clive and Belinda went over to examine the still-open portal. They needed to know if it was safe to return to their own world, and how easy it would be to reopen the portal from this side. They set out a series of carved stones around the portal. They looked like dice; six-sided cubes with a sigil engraved onto each face.

Clive took a pair of wands, handing one to Belinda, and they started waving them about. The cubes floated up into the air and started turning, over and over until they stopped again, one of the engravings of each cube lighting up. Clive hastily scribbled in a notebook before the pair started waving their wands again.

"I would strongly advise against trying to go back through this portal," Clive said after several sequences of this.

"It seems normal," Humphrey said. "As much as any of this is. It looks like Jason's portal power."

"But it isn't," Clive said. "We used Jason's power to incite the portal into opening, but this is not Jason's ability, whatever it may look like. This archway was able to serve as an anchor, allowing the portal to originate from the other side. Whatever power is affecting the ambient magic of the city is having a disruptive effect on anything originating on this side,

though. Trying to go back from this side, even though this already-open portal, would be less like stepping through a door and more like jumping into a meat grinder.”

“So, we’re trapped here?” Neil asked.

“I don’t know about trapped,” Clive said. “Everything we learned while figuring out how to open the portal suggested that leaving should be much easier than intruding in the first place. If I can determine what is going on with the magic, I’m confident I can compensate for it. We can likely trigger the exit without even needing Jason’s power to get things started.”

“We have to assume that whatever is affecting the magic is part of what the cult are doing,” Humphrey said.

“Yes,” Clive said. “The first step to solving this puzzle is figuring that out and finding a way to stop it.”

“I vote we start by killing them all and go from there,” Sophie said.

“You’re probably right,” Jason said with resignation in his voice. “We need to question them, if we can, but I don’t see a diplomatic resolution as a likely outcome.”

“It’s never good, going in knowing that you’re going to be killing people,” Humphrey said. “You shielded the team from that before, Jason, but I won’t let you, this time. We’re adventurers, and adventurers fight monsters, even when they’re people. We all need to come to terms with that.”

Belinda and Neil shared a look, neither having killed anyone before. The others gave them sober but encouraging smiles of reassurance.

“I’d like to start by investigating this tower quite thoroughly,” Clive said. “They are most likely the medium for whatever the cult are up to.”

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “How long will that take?”

“I know this isn’t a great answer,” Clive said, “but it’ll take as long as it takes. Once I’ve started, I can probably get you a better estimate.”

“Once *we’ve* started,” Belinda corrected.

“Just so,” Clive agreed.

The others were at loose ends as Clive started pulling out magical paraphernalia him and Belinda to use. They ended up sitting at the edge of the tower, legs dangling over the side.

With the strange beauty of the overgrown city laid out before him, Jason took a deep breath of the hot, heavy air. It was rich with the scent of plants and earth, mixing with a gentle, salty breeze coming off the water. He had mastered the art of not breathing but he

did it anyway, for the pure pleasure of the sensation. He relished the feel of the warm sun on his skin.

“I know we’re here to fight evil and whatnot,” Jason said, “but damn if I don’t love this job, sometimes.”

Jason spotted the rest of the team sharing a glance.

“What’s that about,” he asked.

“It’s just good to see a real smile,” Neil said. “You’ve been forcing them for a while now, which takes a lot of the fun out of mocking you.”

Sophie thumped Neil on the arm.

“Hey...” Neil complained.

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Before Clive and Belinda started their investigation, Humphrey had Clive take out the tracking stones for the cultists. They didn’t expect to get actual locations, since not only were the cultists most likely bronze-rank after all this time, but the tracking stones traced their Adventure Society badges, not the people themselves.

“They might still have their badges,” Clive said. “They needed them to get in here in the first place. Remember Emir’s people checking the aura signatures on them against Magic Society records?”

“Once they stayed behind, they new their Adventure Society days were done,” Neil said. “I bet they tossed their badges away the second they got here.”

Whether the Cultists kept their badges or not, the tracking stones would at least keep track of who was alive or dead. Even after their aura signature changed enough from ranking up to desynchronise them from their badges,

“Five of them are dead,” Clive said.

“That’s a big win for us,” Sophie said. “It went from six on thirteen to six on eight.”

“Don’t go thinking that makes things easy,” Humphrey warned as he saw the lack of activity from the stones. “The rest aren’t tracking, which means they’re bronze-rank.”

“Or they got turned into flesh abominations,” Belinda added.

“Yes,” Humphrey agreed. “Even if they aren’t the strongest essence users, the tyranny of rank is not something to be dismissive of. We all watched Jason take out one bronze-rankers, but that was just one. A whole cluster of them together is a multiplicative danger, not an additive one.”

“Humphrey, you’ve given us this speech before,” Neil pointed out. “So has your Mother, your sister, Mr Bahadir, Gabriel Remore...”

“And you’ll hear it again before we’re done because it matters,” Humphrey said. “I’m bringing every single one of you out of this place alive.”

“Don’t say things like that,” Jason admonished. “That’s a huge death flag. You might as well pull out a picture of your girl from back home, explain that you’re about to be a father and that you’re two days away from retirement.”

“Jason, this is serious,” Humphrey said.

“I am serious,” Jason said. “How would you feel if I said that nothing can possibly go wrong?”

“Definitely don’t say that,” Neil said.

“Don’t go tempting fate,” Sophie agreed. “Fate can’t wait to kill us all.”

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Clive and Belinda almost seemed to be going over the huge tower brick by huge brick, starting with the top of the tower and making their way down the stairs that wound their way around the outside. Despite the size of the tower, there was no apparent way inside, or any indication whether it was solid or hollow.

“This is really what we’re doing?” Neil complained. “All this build up over going back into the astral space, squaring off against monsters and cultists, and what are we doing? Standing around while Clive looks at bricks.”

“That’s Neil you can hear whinging,” Jason said into a recording crystal. There was a long gap in Jason’s recording crystal travelogue, from just before his kidnapping until he finally felt ready to resume them.

Neil walked over to peer into the recording crystal.

“Jason’s family,” Neil said. “Next time you are going to send us someone, send us someone better. You have a brother, right, Jason?”

“Sod off,” Jason said, pushing Neil out of frame.

Sophie was meditating, knowing that her aura control was not as strong as most of the team. Humphrey patrolled the edge of the tower, looking out for threats. At his heels, Stash was transforming into a series of increasingly adorable puppies. Occasionally he would change into something stranger, such as a replica of one of the Berts, but with a huge moustache.

“I’m really one person pretending to be a lot!” Stash declared enthusiastically.

“Stash!” Humphrey scolded. “What did I say? The Bertinelli brothers are all different people.”

“No!” Stash yelled, turning back into a puppy and sprinting to jump into the lap of Sophie, in her meditative pose. She smiled without opening her eyes, reaching down to scratch the puppy behind the ears as he snuggled into her.

Belinda returned to the top of the tower, calling everyone together. They gathered up and followed her down the stairs to the base of the tower, where Clive was using his power to draw out an incredibly sophisticated ritual diagram on the wall.

“What did you find?” Humphrey asked.

“I’m not sure,” Clive said absently, still drawing the diagram. He waved his finger in the air like a pen and golden lines appeared within the diagram to match. “Some kind of hidden door, although I can’t tell if it’s a cupboard or the whole thing is empty.”

Eventually Clive finished the diagram and chanted out an opening spell. A section of wall soundlessly slid back into the tower and slid up, revealing a large, dark space beyond. The others could make out a shape from the light coming through door, only Jason seeing clearly. He stepped up and looked around the interior of what turned out to be the hollow tower. He realised what the looming shape taking up most of the space was and his eyes went wide.

“What is that?” Humphrey asked, peering into the dark.

The lump of metal the size of a car they were looking at was the front half of a giant, metallic foot.