

## Chapter 208

### Defiance

The pain of the tiny objects digging into his flesh was something Jason could endure well enough. In the last six months he had endured enough suffering, mental and physical that he could take the peppering of wounds in stride, even as he dangled, helpless, from the ceiling. Below him, the magic circle shone with a silver light.

“The star seed implantation process is not a swift one,” Killian said. “First, the seed will carve itself throughout your body, suborning your flesh in preparation for claiming your body as its own. The pain you are feeling now is simply a slow, easy start. It will grow over time, escalating until your mind can no longer endure it and breaks. But that will still only be the beginning. You will be broken again and again until there is nothing left of you and only the will of the Builder remains. The star seed is a door that will allow him to reach through and claim your soul.”

“And I’ll be here to watch,” Silva said gleefully. “You know the best part, though, Asano? Let me tell you the part that convinced me that this was the way to punish you.”

“The chance for monologuing?” Jason guessed, his voice only slightly strained. “You don’t need a star seed for that. You could have just explained your evil plot and then left, assuming everything would go as planned. That’s how they do it where I come from.”

“Go ahead and blabber, Asano.”

“Okay. You should seriously re-evaluate the ergonomics in here because I don’t think this is good for my shoulders.”

“Shut up!”

“Make up your mind, guy. You really need to...”

Jason was cut off by a stab of pain.

“Sorry, what was that, Asano?” Silva asked with a malevolent chuckle. “This is going to be very, very hard for you.”

Jason let out a pain-tinged chuckle of his own.

“That’s funny,” he groaned.

“What is?”

“I said the exact same thing to your mother last night.”

“Really, Asano? The pain must be getting to you if cheap jokes about my mother are the best you can manage. My mother died a dozen years ago; her ashes are interred in the family mausoleum.”

“That did take most of the fun out of it,” Jason admitted. “All I could really do was take the lid off the urn and waggle my thing in there.”

Silva’s face turned fury red and he moved to attack Jason, but stopped himself at the edge of the magic diagram.

“Please restrain yourself, Mr Silva,” Killian said. “Trust that the process will slowly bring him a level of suffering that no amount of bravado can endure.”

Silva relaxed and the evil grin returned to his face.

“You’re right, Killian,” he said. “You interrupted me, Asano, when I was about to explain the best part of this whole thing. You see, it turns out that a star seed can’t take you over. Not unless you let it.”

“The inviolable soul,” Killian said. “One of the most fundamental rules of magic.”

“So what the star seed does,” Silva continued, relishing every word, “is just keep ramping up the pain, until your mind can’t take it. Don’t think you will find relief in dark insensibility, though. After your body, it will come for your soul. There’s no hiding from that. It may not have a way to invade your soul, Asano, but it can hurt it. You’re going to suffer in ways you cannot imagine, but you won’t have to, because you’ll feel it. You can’t prevent it, avoid it or escape it. You will suffer and suffer until you can’t take any more and you give the Builder what he wants. You will open the door and let him in, allowing his will supplant yours, just so the pain will stop. You be nothing more than a vessel, a puppet. An empty husk, dancing on a string.”

Silva stepped up close to Jason, carefully stepping over the lines of the magic circle without disturbing them. He gripped Jason by the hair and spoke softly into his ear.

“I’m going to watch it all,” Silva whispered. “I’m going to taste your pain, revel in your suffering. The last thing you see, in the final moment before your soul is snuffed out, will be my face. The last thought you have will be the realisation that you have been completely, utterly and irrevocably broken, and that it happened because you took something that was mine.”

Jason didn’t respond, gritting his teeth against the pain, like icy-cold worms burrowing through his body. Silva ran his hand down the side of Jason’s face.

“And when we’re done, we’ll let you go,” he said. “Of course, it won’t really be you. I wonder what the Builder will have you do. Run off to the cultists? Perhaps you’ll go back to your friends and see how much damage you can do before they catch on that you aren’t home anymore. I would really like to hear that you killed Sophie. Would you do that for me? Make it ugly, too. Make her ugly. Let everyone know that what’s mine is mine, and no one else’s.”

“I don’t know if anyone’s told you this,” Jason forced out through gritted teeth, “but you’re kind of a prick.”

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Jason felt the progress of the star seed as it invaded his body in the form of biting cold, like his veins were turning to ice. As the cold burrowed its way through his body, however, the trails it left behind started to warm again. Jason could feel Colin’s presence, working to reclaim his body from the star seed. As the star seed took hold over his body he realised that it felt very much like Colin’s dark mirror; cold and dead instead of warm and filled with vibrant life.

Colin’s attempts to reclaim Jason’s body didn’t help with the pain. Just the opposite, in fact, as the star seed and the familiar fought a war inside his body. Colin was not truly in Jason’s blood, however, but instead as a spirit form within Jason’s soul, anchored to the physical world through the blood. In most cases, the death of a summoner would cause the familiar spirit to return to the astral as it’s anchor was severed. If Jason’s soul was violated, however, Colin’s spirit would be made vulnerable. Jason didn’t know what that would mean for his familiar but he was confident that it was nothing good.

Jason knew Colin’s efforts were inevitably doomed as the star seed altered his flesh faster than Colin could restore it. In that moment, however, he felt an incredible warmth for the life-devouring apocalypse beast working so hard to help him. He was filled with fresh determination to fight on, to protect his familiar the way his familiar was protecting him.

Silva never seemed to tire of taunting Jason, but as the pain escalated, Jason was no longer hearing the words. All that he had was the pain, a world of white noise with no sense of place or time. When the pain abruptly receded and his senses started to return, he had no idea how long it had been.

“What happened?” Silva asked. Jason had visibly relaxed and the silver glow of the magic circle had significantly dimmed.

Killian frowned.

“The star seed is a magically hungry object,” Killian said. “It is a channel to the will of the Builder, an entity so powerful that if he were to directly come into contact with this world he would annihilate it. The purpose of the magic circle is to gather and concentrate the ambient magic to create a reservoir of power. When the seed becomes dormant, it’s replenishing itself by drawing on that reserve. That way, in spite of it’s heavy magical consumption, it can outlast anyone it is implanted in, no matter how great their endurance.”

“You’re only telling me about this now?”

“It shouldn’t have happened this quickly,” Killian said.

“Did you mess up the ritual?”

“If I failed to use the ritual correctly, the seed would not have become active in the first place.”

Killian turned a curious gaze on Jason.

“Something about Asano is hindering the seed’s work on his body, forcing it to work harder, consume its stores of power more quickly.”

Jason let out a pained laugh that turned into a choking cough, but he grinned madly at his captors, eyes still alive.

“Keep smiling,” Silva told him. “If you didn’t have spirit, what would the fun be in breaking it?”

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The first reprieve lasted only a few minutes before the magic circle grew brighter and the pain resumed. Colin had used that time to try and reclaim territory but it wasn’t enough and Jason was only vaguely aware that the screams he heard were his own before returning to that white space of pain.

There were other brief spells of reprieve as the star seed exhausted itself against Jason and when dormant to replenish its power. To Jason, it felt like each break was shorter than the last. In truth, they were growing longer, but his increasing diminished capacities were no longer able to gauge it. Colin’s efforts were likewise becoming less effective; as Jason weakened, so did he.

“It’s taking longer and longer,” Silva complained. “The last time it was stopped for hours. How long will this one be?”

“Probably most of the night,” Killian said. “The magical density in this region is too low for the circle to collect magic efficiently. I suggest we take this time to rest. I had Remi set up some beds in the next room. We’ll know to come back when the screaming resumes.”

“I don’t want to miss him breaking,” Silva said.

“You won’t,” Killian said. “He is proving much more resistant than I anticipated. You’ll have all the time you need to enjoy his suffering.”

“I want to watch him break.”

“You will, Mr Silva. After the body comes the mind, and then the soul. What is the will of one man against a being greater than our entire world?”

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“He’s just hanging there,” Silva said with disgust. “No screams, no writhing. He’s practically relaxed.”

“The star seed had claimed his body now,” Killian said. “We are approaching the end. Even his brain is no longer his own. Whatever remains of his consciousness will have taken final refuge in the bastion of his soul. Soon, he will yield and you shall see him break, just as you wished.”

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The pain was gone, but Jason’s senses did not return. There was no sight, no sound, no touch. He was in a place of pure will, the border between his soul and the entity that sought to claim it. He felt adrift at sea, not one of water but of an immense will. A will too large for Jason to even conceive it’s totality. Greater than the sky, more vast than the sun. Older than the stars and more unfathomable than the deepest voids of space.

Before that will, Jason was naked and exposed. It was more than being weak and vulnerable. In the face of that unconscionable power, not only was it beyond what he was, but beyond anything he ever could be. Anything he could even conceive of. He was the smallest speck of creation in front of a force that transcended creation.

Oddly, it was not a wholly unfamiliar sensation. From the moment he had been cast adrift in a strange world full of power and danger, he had been surrounded by forces larger than himself. Time and again he had been brought to the brink, constantly under pressure. He had fought off death and stood defiant in the face of gods. Life in his new world was a fire, burning away everything he had believed himself to be and refining him down to what he truly was.

He could feel the desire for capitulation radiating from that the vast will. The pressure it exerted, pushing in on his soul. But he knew that pressure. He had endured it from the very start, as if every thing he encountered in this world was preparing him for this moment. Next to the alien mind of the Builder and its towering will, Jason was nothing. But he realised that even the transcendent being with all its power could not open the doors to his soul. So long as he had the will to defy it, the Builder could not claim him. He gathered his own will and threw it into the Builder’s own, a grain of sand in a hurricane.

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“Is he... grinning?” Silva asked. “He’s grinning! How is... what... Killian! What is happening?”

“I have no idea,” Killian said. If Jason’s ears still belonged to him he would have recognised the same delighted tone Clive would get on encountering something completely unexpected.

The two men were startled when Jason spoke.

“Is that all you’ve got, mate? You’ll have to do better than that, you interdimensional asshole.”

Killian started laughing madly.

“You think this is funny?” Silva asked him.

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Killian said, awestruck. “That really, really shouldn’t be possible.”

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In the wake of Jason’s outburst, the pressure of that vast will suddenly vanished. Like a becalmed sea, the absolute stillness carried an ominous sense of danger, isolation and helplessness. Most of all, it carried a silent threat; an anticipation of what would come when the weather inevitably turned.

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Killian and Silva looked on as Jason once more hung limp and unmoving. Silva was increasingly agitated while Killian had gone from curious observation to avid fascination.

“We should kill him now,” Silva said. “I’ll do it.”

“You would be well advised not to take back what you have offered to the Builder,” Killian said. “We started this and have to see it through to the end or pay the price.”

“What kind of price?”

“The worst kind,” Killian said. “The price you don’t know until you pay it. But you don’t have to worry; a man cannot defy the will of a transcendent being.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“Then that is the point we kill him, and make sure it’s done right,” Killian said. “A man who can defy that kind of power can do anything. That’s not a man you leave alive, not after what we’ve done him. But as I said, that simply isn’t possible.”

Silva opened his mouth to respond but stopped, both men turning to face the door. They both sensed the agitated aura of the guard, Remi, rapidly approach. His arrival was marked with a hammering knock.

“Mr Silva, Mr Laurent,” Remi’s voice came through. Remi, was in charge of watching over the site while Silva and Killian dealt with Jason, and he should not have left the security room unless something went wrong.

Silva and Killian went to the outer room and Killian opened the exterior door.

“What is it?” he demanded.

“We’ve been sleeping in shifts, in the security room,” Remi said. “I just woke up to find Coburn dead and Jerrick gone. I didn’t feel any aura surge from powers being used,

so he must have killed Coburn without using them. There was a stab wound in the back of Coburn's neck."

"How long ago?" Killian asked.

"I can't be sure," Remi said. "Hours, I don't know how many."

"It makes no sense," Silva said. "Why would he do that?"

"I don't know," Remi said. "I can only assume it is something to do with Jerrick's connection to Asano."

"Why?" Silva asked again. "If anything, he should want to get his own kicks in. Why kill Coburn and leave?"

"To give himself time to reach the city," Killian said, then sighed. "It's over."

"You don't know that," Silva said. "Why would Jerrick help Asano? It makes no sense."

Caught up in his own thoughts, still voicing questions out loud, Siva didn't notice the sudden change in Killian, although Remi did. Killian's normal, obsequious posture straightened, his creepy, pandering half-smile vanishing. Killian stood tall, pale face blank and expressionless, his eyes hard. Even his aura changed, becoming steely hard.

"Just because you lack the imagination doesn't mean there isn't a reason," Killian said to Silva. "He may be trying to regain admittance to the Adventure Society by helping the man who got him kicked out. He might have realised that we were using the Builder cult's star seed and balked. In the end, the reasons don't matter, only the result."

"Wait, what was that about the Builder cult?" Remi asked.

Killian glanced at Remi and a bone spike shot out of the ground, impaling the henchman. The power difference between a skilled and powerful bronze-ranker closing in on silver and a failed adventurer like Remi was made blindingly obvious as the henchman's corpse slid limply down the spike. Silva looked on in shock, realising that Killian was far stronger than he had ever let on.

"We are done," Killian said. "We're done here, we're done in Greenstone and we are done as a collaboration."

"What are you talking about?" Silva asked.

"Do you still not understand that this undertaking wasn't even risk?" Killian asked. "It was always going to go wrong. Your position in Greenstone is untenable, now. Asano's allies are too powerful, and I promise they are coming for you, even as we speak. It was always going to come to this."

"Then why did you go along with it?" Silva asked. "You arranged most of this."

“Because I have diverted enough resources from your operations over the past year to meet my needs going forward,” Killian said. “When Lamprey brought this idea to you it presented the perfect distraction to extricate myself from you and this city. While everyone is chasing after you for killing Asano, I can conclude my affairs and depart in peace. This is where we part ways, Mr Silva.”

Silva reeled at the betrayal of his most trusted follower.

“You’re turning against me?”

“Of course,” Killian said. “If anything, I’m amazed anyone is loyal to you at all. You’re completely oblivious to how much effort I had to expend on holding your organisation together, in spite of your best efforts.”

Silva lunged at Killian, only for more bones to erupt from the ground, spearing into Silva’s flesh and holding him in place. Silva grabbed two of the bones and started flexing them outwards, but while the bones gave a little, they held. Silva’s strength-enhancing power was in the early stages of bronze, no match for Killian’s conjuration power that had already reached silver.

“So pathetic,” Killian said. “You could put up more of a fight, if you knew how, but you don’t even understand your own powers. All those monster cores. Helpless victims instead of even the pretence of actual combat. You truly are a wretched thing, but I won’t kill you, Mr Silva. When you wake up, I suggest you don’t spare Asano the same mercy. If the Builder doesn’t have him by then, kill him and run. With Asano’s friends after you, you’ll be lucky to live long enough to pay the price of denying the Builder.”

Silva glared at Killian with frenzied eyes.

“And if they catch me and I set them on you?”

“Mr Silva, you don’t know a single thing about me. You don’t know who works for me, or what my holdings are. If you did, you’d wonder why so many of them had gone missing from your own months ago.”

“I’m going to kill you,” Silva snarled.

“Unlikely, but good luck,” Killian said. A skeletal arm burst through the pavers and started choking Silva. Silva tried to spit out more words but they came out as a choked-off gurgle. He tried to use his active powers but the bone cage had a suppression effect that prevented them from activating. His last thought before passing out was fury at a world that kept denying him the things that were his by right.

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All that was left of Jason’s true self was hidden away in the fortress of his soul. His body stolen, he had no brain to drive his thoughts and was quickly reduced to little more



than that a last scrap of will, the innermost core of his being. Beyond the impregnable walls of his soul, the power of the Builder had undergone a change. If it could not cow Jason into capitulation, it would go back to inflicting pain until he yielded.

The Builder's will became a hurricane of knives, scoring marks across Jason's soul. It was a pain unlike anything the body could suffer, cutting not at flesh but at the very essence of his being. Jason endured, the warm presence of his familiar beside him. In his unthinking state he had a vague sense of things that were missing. He no longer remembered the familiars he had yet to resummon, yet he felt their absence.

It became worse, knives becoming drills trying to bore their way into his soul. Yet still, they failed. So long as Jason had the will to resist, they could not breach his soul. All they could do was bring pain that carried with it a promise. It could all stop, and all he had to do was give in.

The pain scoured away the echoes that were the remnants of what Jason had been when his body and mind were his own. All that remained was a meagre scrap of self, ragged and torn, yet still unyielding.

The days of torment since the star seed was implanted were a microcosm of every threat he had faced since arriving in his new world. Those memories were now gone but their effects were still felt. Those events had made him anew, reforging the very core of his being into something that would never stop struggling. Even against the indomitable will of an alien mind, with power beyond imagining. Even when there was nothing left of him but the will to struggle.

The Builder's will was unrelenting, sending pain into the reaches of Jason's soul it could otherwise not reach. into the fortress of Jason's soul. All that remained was a flickering ember, the last scrap of his true self. The alien mind strove to extinguish that final spark but it refused to die out.

After stripping everything else away, only one part of Jason remained. The one thing that had kept him going, every time he walked the line between life and death. That pushed him on in the face of monsters, cultists, cannibals and gods. The memories of those experiences were lost but the will they had formed was the one thing he had left. The unwillingness to bend, to conform, to capitulate. All that remained of Jason was pure, unadulterated defiance.

Jason could not out-endure the Builder, any more than a dandelion could withstand a tornado. But while the great astral being had no limits, the star seed connecting it to Jason did. The harder the Builder pushed Jason, the faster its power was consumed. Finally, the Builder's will faded as the seed went dormant, forced to stop and replenish itself.

In the aftermath of the storm, Jason's soul pulsed and throbbed, rattled by the forces that had besieged it. From deep within, something shifted, as if the alien power drilling into it had uncovered some vast power, buried and forgotten. Power built and built, pressure climbing like the inside of a volcano. The fading ember of Jason's will ignited into a furious flame and Jason's soul erupted, burning away at the icy clutches of the star seed that had claimed his body. Colin's spirit soared out, the familiar adding its own power as Jason will strove to reclaim the now undefended body.

The Builder's will returned, having sensed the danger to the star seed in Jason's resurgence. There was only a fragment of power left within the star seed and Jason felt a flicker of uncertainty in that ancient, alien mind. It had to stop Jason now before the star seed was fully overcome, impinging upon him with all the strength of its will.

The seed, already drained of all but the last skerrick of energy could not take the strain. The Builder's attempt to head Jason off before he could turn the tables on the seed had itself pushed the seed past its limits, ruining it for good.

The connection was gone and the Builder's will with it, the seed's power burned out, not to return. The physical remnants of the seed were still in Jason's body but they were inert, a spent force. The end of their power was not the end of their threat, however. Those physical remnants riddled Jason's body. Without the seed's power keeping him alive as it transformed him, the foreign matter running through his body was now killing him. If not for the strange nature of his outworlder body, he would have been dead already.

Even as his body failed, however, his soul reclaimed it. Jason's consciousness returned, only to fade away, unable to function.

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Jason came to, still hanging from the ceiling. His body was wet with his own blood, leaking from rents in his flesh where the star seed fragments had been pushed back out of his body. Colin had somehow kept him alive through the laborious task of purging his body of the star seed, slowly restoring him to something resembling health. He could feel Colin, now dormant inside him. The familiar had given all that he had to keep Jason alive.

"You did good, buddy," Jason croaked. "You have yourself a good rest."

His body was ravaged, more weak and exhausted as he had ever thought possible. Yet somehow, he felt strong, stronger than he had ever been. He could feel his soul, sense it in a way that never could before. It was his true self, his last refuge, not the meat shell he'd been walking around in. Ever since finding out his body had been destroyed and remade from magic, he had a sense of unease about himself and his very existence. That

was gone, now, as he realised that the body he wore was ultimately no more important than a suit.

He craned his neck to look down at the fragments of start seed on the floor underneath him. The magic circle had turned to ash. He started laughing, hoarse and painful, but he kept on laughed like a madman.

“I don’t know if you can hear me through that your dead magic rectal probe,” Jason said, “but you need to listen up, you interdimensional land bandit. You just got beat by the assistant manager of an office supply retailer while he was hanging from a hook and naked as the day he was born. And reborn, I guess. So you’d best back up your piss weak little cult and take them back to your magic land in the sky because I’m coming for them. And this time, I’m going to have pants.”