

## Chapter 206

### The Man Behind the Mouth

The room was almost entirely bare of features, a dark stone box with no windows. There was a heavy steel door, a recessed glow stone in the ceiling and a metal chain staked into the hard floor. The other end of the chain was affixed to a power suppression collar around the neck of a naked body. Jason was unconscious, laying on the hard stone.

On the other side of the door were Killian Laurent and the cloaked figure of Mr Sparrow. They were standing in another stone room, although this one was largely stacked with crates.

“You are confident you got away clean?” Killian asked.

“Short of a gold-ranker specialised in stealth and tracking having followed, then yes.”

“You have our gratitude, Mr Sparrow,” Killian said. “You will find your usual arrangements waiting at the usual place, but I have also arranged a little bonus I am confident you will find tantalising.”

“Then my part in this is done and I wash my hands of it,” Sparrow said. “You would be well-advised to not bring this matter up again, Laurent. You would be even better advised to make sure no one else brings up my participation in it.”

“I shall keep your advice in mind,” Killian said. “I believe you know that my discretion can be relied upon, Mr Sparrow.”

Sparrow’s hooded head nodded, then he stepped into a shadow and disappeared. With Sparrow gone, Laurent left the room. The building was nothing more than those two rooms, located right where the delta met the desert.

It had once been one of the way stations the Magic Society used to transfer spirit coin shipments from the farms. Disused for a number of years, the small outpost was both secure and isolated. It had been abandoned decades ago as more coin farms went into operation, changing the transport routes and requiring larger facilities. It had a paved area where shipments were transferred, the once level pavers now shifted and uneven.

There was a second, smaller building that had been the security station, with large, reflective windows. The alchemically treated glass both helped keep the interior cool and prevented those outside from seeing in.

Inside the security building were three people, including another of the precious few bronze-rankers in Silva’s organisation. Silva was intent on keeping the location secure and had hand-picked the three to manage the site. The bronze-ranker came out to meet Killian.

“Mr Laurent,” the man said respectfully. Of the bronze rankers under Silva, Killian was the unquestionable leader. “Thank you for refreshing the cooling magic on the security building.”

“Of course, Remi,” Killian said. “Mr Silva puts a great deal of value and trust in you. How are your people?”

“Coburn is solid. Not what you’d call a deep thinker, but he knows when to keep his ears open and mouth shut. The other one, Jerrick, has some real potential; I’ve worked with him before. I was surprised to see him selected for this, though. He’s only been in the organisation a few months.”

“Mr Silva prefers the newer people he recruited himself after clearing out his father’s old mainstays,” Killian said. “Those who have taken pains to demonstrate their loyalty are his most valued people. Otherwise, he prefers the people he has recruited and cultivated himself. It avoids any issues with nostalgic loyalties.”

Remi nodded. “The old man had too many scruples, leaving money on the table all over. Mr Silva isn’t caught up in old ways of thinking.”

“Just so,” Killian said. “Jerrick has a history with our guest. Asano is responsible for his being struck off the Adventure Society rolls, as well as ruining the man’s relationship with the nobleman he was working for.”

Remi frowned. “I don’t like personal connections,” he said. “It stops people from doing their job properly.”

“I am not unsympathetic, Remi, but Mr Silva felt that Jerrick would share his passion for seeing that Asano gets what is coming to him.”

“He’s the boss,” Remi said. “If he wants it, he gets it.”

Killian smiled with his thin, pale lips.

“That’s an attitude that will take you far, Remi. I am leaving, now, to bring Mr Silva. Remember that we want to maintain the illusion of this location’s abandonment.”

“We’ll stay in the building and out of sight,” Remi said.

“Check on our guest every hour,” Killian said. “Once he’s awake, give him a spirit coin to eat. Mr Silva wants him strong and healthy enough to survive what we have planned.”

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The ache in Jason’s body as he regained consciousness paled in comparison to the pain digging into his brain like a railroad spike. It was an unpleasantly nostalgic feeling, taking him back to his first hours in this world when he had been knocked out multiple times in quick succession, only a few potions and a dose of healing magic staving off a lethal brain haemorrhage.

His first thought was to open his inventory and grab a potion, but his inventory window appeared in a haze of static before blinking out again. He tried to bring up other interface windows, receiving the same result. Muscles protesting, he pushed himself to a sitting position and fumbled at his neck, finding a thick iron choker. He had never worn a suppression collar but had used them on others. It was obvious that this was the source of his power problem.

He could still feel Colin inside his blood, but the connection to him that Jason normally experienced seemed strangely obstructed. He could tell that trying to bring out his familiar wouldn't work and even the attempt might have a painful backlash. On the bright side, Colin's power to heal him was still in effect. He could already feel the aches in his body clearing up and the fuzziness in his head fading away.

Jason took stock of his situation. His clothes were gone, although most of his adventuring gear was safely stashed in his inventory. The only important item missing was his new amulet. He sat cross-legged as he looked around.

He was in a room of desert stone. It was warm rather than cold, not too unpleasant to sit on. The sun-warmed brick meant that he probably wasn't underground, despite the lack of windows.

The chain linking him to the floor wasn't long enough for him to stand, only sit or kneel. Even leaning too far forward caused it to tug at his neck in a choking grip. The rest of the room had little to offer, just a heavy metal door and a glow stone in the ceiling.

He had no idea who had come after him, remembering nothing but a dark shape erupting out of an alley. It may have been a bronze-ranker, although a silver was more likely. He had a high-enough evaluation of his own powers to think that even a bronze-ranker would have trouble so thoroughly blindsiding him with darkness and stealth.

His circumstances weren't great, but not completely hopeless, either. If whoever had taken him wanted him dead, then he already would be. He didn't expect his near future to be pleasant, however. He suspected Colin's healing power would be very useful.

*If you can hear me in there, Colin, stop the healing until I say so. If they don't know you can still help me, you can be my secret weapon for what comes next.*

Although the connection was dimmed, Jason got a sense of assent from his familiar.

With no other options, Jason sat and meditated. A while later, Jason sensed the approach of a bronze-rank aura, meaning at least his aura senses remained intact. The person came into the room and Jason opened his eyes.

“You’ve got a henchman look about you,” Jason said. “I don’t suppose I could seduce you and secretly pocket the keys to this collar? Well, I say pocket.”

He indicated his naked body.

“It’s a figure of speech, obviously.”

The stony-faced man tossed a spirit coin at Jason, who caught it out of the air. “Eat. The boss wants you healthy for what he’s got planned.”

“I’m guessing it’s not a charity fun run. So, who’s the boss? If Tony Danza walks in here, I’m going to lose it.”

The man gave a confused frown and left without answering. Jason wondered how long he would be able to keep up the banter before whatever was coming took its toll. He examined the coin, but his interface again gave a fuzz of static and vanished without giving him any information. It seemed like an ordinary spirit coin, the crystalline object a dull iron colour.

He considered it unlikely to be some kind of trap. In his current situation they didn’t need subterfuge to make him ingest poison or some tainted object. Keeping his strength up was an obviously good idea, but he ultimately tossed it into the corner. In his studies of magic he knew there were certain kinds of magic, usually involving the soul, that required willing participation. Without it, the soul was largely inviolable, even to the most potent magical forces. He wasn’t willing to take the chance that eating the coin was the acceptance of some magical end user licence agreement

It was some time before the door opened again to admit two people. One was dressed in the kind of expensive style that made sure everyone knew how much their clothes cost. The cut seemed familiar and Jason suspected the man used the same tailor as Thadwick Mercer.

The man in the fancy clothes looked young. That was hardly an achievement, given the bronze-rank aura, but there was also an immaturity to his snide expression. Jason had known enough high-rankers to recognise a level of easy confidence and equanimity in those whose youth belied their age. This man had the look of a boy.

In addition to his looks, the boy-man’s aura marked him as mediocre. Jason’s perception power wouldn’t enhance his aura senses until it ranked up a second time, but he could almost smell the monster cores the man had used, as if he’d drenched himself in some nasty cologne. Jason doubted the man had ever faced a monster in the wild.

Next to the human was a startlingly creepy elf, whose dark clothes made the sickly, pallid skin stand out all the more. Jason suspected the man to have been altered by his essence powers. The kinds of powers that fundamentally changed a person were the kind

that usually landed the essences that produced them on the restricted list. Jason would not have been at all surprised to find the death essence in the man's repertoire.

"So," the boy-man said. "You're the Jason Asano that's been causing such a ruckus."

"If I said you had the wrong guy, I don't suppose you'd let me go?"

Jason was still sitting, cross-legged on the floor. The chain would not allow him to take his feet and face his captors.

"You have no idea how bad the rest of your short life is going to be," the boy-man said. "Do you even know who I am?"

"You're definitely not Tony Danza," Jason said. "If you're Judith Light, life has taken you down some very odd roads."

"What are you babbling about?" the boy-man asked.

"He's spouting nonsense to put you off," the elf said in a voice as creepy as the rest of him. "Don't let him distract you."

"So, you're the Palpatine to his Vader," Jason said to the elf. "I know the routine. Just to save you some time, giving in to my hatred will be an easy sell, under the circumstances."

"Shut up!" the boy-man yelled. "My name is Cole Silva."

"You're Cole Silva?" Jason asked.

"That's right," Silva said, gloatingly. "Now you understand what kind of trouble you're in."

"The name doesn't ring a bell," Jason said, brow creasing as he strained to recall. "Wait, did you sell me that dodgy magic food processor? The pulse setting on that thing was rubbish. Is this revenge for complaining to the Artifice Association about your shoddy standards? I think we both know that's really on you."

"I'm one of the Big Three!" Silva yelled. Jason suppressed a grin at seeing the elf clearly wanting to interject but unwilling to risk the younger man's temper.

"Oh, the crime lords," Jason said, realisation dawning in his voice. "I've met Adris Dorgan; very cool guy. He has that combination of class and masculinity that lets him really carry off that dapper look. Then there's Clarissa Ventress and that other one. I forget the name because everyone just calls him the stupid one. I have to say, Clarissa, you don't look anything like how you were described."

Silva lunged at Jason only for bones spears to erupt from the hard brick floor like a wall to block him off. Silva turned his furious glare on the elf.

"Mr Silva," the elf said. "Don't let him goad you into giving him a quick death. Nothing you can do will be worse than what we already have in store for him."

Silva fumed but enough of the rage drained away that he got himself back under control. Silva angrily tugged his clothes back into place as the bone spears disappeared, leaving holes in the stone floor. and then turned a malevolent grin on Jason.

“We’ll see if you’re still so clever once the pain begins,” Silva told Jason.

“I will be,” Jason said. “It just won’t show because of the screaming and begging. I’m pretty sure there’ll be begging. I don’t know what you want from me, exactly, but I hope it’s not dignity. You took my pants, though, so I’m guessing that’s not an issue.”

“All I want is for you to pay for the things you’ve taken from me,” Silva said.

“Which didn’t include fashion advice, thankfully,” Jason said. “You need to tone it down, which is really saying something with the way people dress in Greenstone.”

“I will be interested to see how long your courage holds,” the elf said.

“Oh, that’s long gone,” Jason said. “This is pretty much terrified babble I’m trying to pass off as bravado. The inability to wet myself is only thing selling it, at this point.”

The elf gave Jason a hungry smile.

Silva snorted derision. “You willing admit to fear?”

“I’m chained up, naked, in a room with the winner of a most obvious sex-predator contest and the guy who got disqualified for being too creepy. Not being scared is admitting to being an idiot.”

“Mr Silva, I think it’s time to show him.”

“Will he even know what it is?” Silva asked.

“I didn’t tell you?” the elf said. “Our friend here is the one who procured it in the first place.”

“Really?” Silva said with a sinister chuckle. “That’s almost poetry.”

A bone cabinet rose up out of the floor, reminding Jason of the stone chest storage space that Farrah had. This also proved to be a storage space as the elf took out an object Jason recognised. It was held in a cubic metal frame, a sphere made up entirely of tiny little bricks the colour of grey stone.

“Star seed,” Jason said, his face turning pale. “You’re with the Builder cult?”

“Not at all,” the elf said. “This is the very same star seed that you acquired and was taken by the church of Purity. When the temple’s assets were being seized, we managed to snag this little treasure. And now we are going to return it to you.”

Jason said nothing, fierce eyes locked on the elf.

“There he is,” the elf said with delight. “The man behind the mouth.”

“You’d best be very careful about what happens next,” Jason said, “or you might come to regret having met him.”

## Chapter 207

### Search

Killian began the elaborate preparations to use the star seed. He started by conjuring up skeletal arms that he used to hammer a spike into the ceiling, which he then hung a pair of manacles from. He unlatched the chain from Jason's suppression collar and then used the skeleton arms to force Jason's wrists into the manacles. Jason didn't bother to struggle, saving his strength.

Once Jason was hanging uncomfortably from the ceiling, Killian took a series of pouches from his bone storage cabinet, pouring powder from them to make a complex ritual circle under Jason's feet. When that was done he started placing objects into the circle. Some were simple bricks of precious materials, others were tools made from exotic metals.

"How exactly do you know how to do all this?" Jason asked.

"That's actually a good question," Silva said, watching from the side. "How did you learn a Builder cult ritual?"

"From a Builder cultist, obviously," Killian said. "You opened your operations to people your father would never deal with and the Builder cult seized the opportunity. When Thalia Mercer started kicking down doors, why did you think so many of them were yours?"

"You facilitated this?" Silva asked.

"Your exact words were 'more money, less questions,'" Killian said.

"He's put you in bed with the enemy of the whole world," Jason said. "Do you even know what the Builder cult is doing? They're plundering whole chunks of this world like dimensional pirates and they don't care who or what is destroyed in the process. That's not an association you can run far enough to escape, Silva."

"Shut up," Silva snarled.

"What's done is done," Killian said calmly. "The only way forward is forward."

Killian placed the final object, the star seed, directly underneath Jason.

"And now we begin," he said.

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Thalia met Clive and Neil in one of the Mercer family receiving parlours.

"Neil," Thalia Mercer greeted. "Always a pleasure. And Mr Standish, hello again. You'll have to accept my apology but I can only spare a little time. The Builder cult has gone underground, which has made rooting them out all the more work."

“Then we’ll go directly to the point,” Neil said. “Jason Asano has gone missing.”

Thalia frowned.

“You’re sure it’s foul play? I recall he went off without telling anyone once before, during the time he was seeing Cassandra.”

“We’re sure,” Neil said.

“I’m not sure exactly how I can help,” Thalia said.

“We’re looking into anyone with the motivation to do something to Jason,” Clive said. “You’re the spearhead of the Builder cult investigation, now.”

“You think the Builder cult might be behind it?” Thalia asked. “Revenge for taking a star seed from them? It seems like they would have larger concerns.”

Clive and Neil both took on awkward expressions.

“That’s true, Lady Mercer,” Clive said. “We were thinking of another potential scenario. To be blunt, we’re talking about Thadwick.”

Thalia’s expression went dark. “Thadwick is a prisoner. A victim.”

“Most likely, yes,” Neil said. “We’re simply exploring every possibility, however remote.”

“We don’t understand how much of the original personality survives once a start seed takes over,” Clive said. “It may well be that Thadwick’s own personality is suppressed but the thing that’s taken him over inherited his hatred of Jason and is acting on it.”

“We both know that Thadwick had become fixated on Jason,” Neil said to Thalia. “Jason had become the symbol of his recent setbacks.”

“Even if what you’re saying were true,” Thalia said, “what could I do that I haven’t already done? You think I haven’t been trying to get my son back? He’s been gone for months, now. For all we know, he was in the pile of bodies that Remore and his parents left on that island. They’re still sorting through the bodies, trying to identify them all.”

“The thing is,” Neil said, “we’ve all been operating under the assumption that Thadwick has been wholly supplanted by the star seed.”

“If he is more of a gestalt entity,” Clive picked up, “then that may open avenues of investigation that you otherwise may have overlooked. Places that Thadwick would think to go.”

“I may be emotionally invested in my son’s return,” Thalia said, “but I am not blinded by emotion. From the point we realised the cult was acting on Thadwick’s knowledge we immediately tried every avenue we could think of that might be driven by his thinking, instead of the cult.”

She got to her feet.



“That is all the time I have to spare,” she said, her voice cold and dismissive. “You know the way out, Neil.”

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“Mr Remore,” Dorgan greeted. “Of course you are welcome in my home, but I didn’t realise we were meeting this openly.”

“Do you know why I’m here?” Rufus asked.

“The absentee Mr Asano, I can only assume,” Dorgan said. “My understanding is that he’s been known to go off without notice before.”

“This isn’t that,” Rufus said.

“Well, let me begin by asserting that I am neither responsible nor complicit.”

“Do you know who is?”

“I only met Mr Asano the one time,” Dorgan said. “He struck me as someone who likes to play games above his rank with a rather insufferable smugness. Frankly, I’m surprised it took this long for him to mysteriously disappear.”

“I need answers, not more questions.”

“Well, while there are any number of candidates, there are not so many stupid enough to risk the wrath of you and your friends. Or your parents. Good gods, no sane person would cross a pair of gold rankers.”

“Who would?”

“Cole Silva, probably. Poor judgement, fierce temper. I’ve known him since he was a boy. The girl too; she may be the only thing he was ever truly denied. I think you’ve deeply underestimated just how angry Cole is over being frustrated in the moment he thought he finally had her. Ventress understood the depths of that feeling and used it as a weapon.”

“You think Silva is responsible?”

“All I have for you is conjecture, based on my understanding of Cole. He’s arrogant enough but I’m not sure he would make the attempt without prompting. Even if he’s responsible, you may want to look elsewhere for the origin of the scheme.”

“Whoever came up with the idea is secondary,” Rufus said. “Finding Asano is the priority.”

“Well, I don’t have him, or know who does. All I can offer is some advice. If you look into Silva, don’t look to Silva himself. Look for what he’s been doing. Even he isn’t fool enough to take your friend without precautions. Find those precautions and you find your friend. Presuming Silva is the one that took him.”

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Danielle and Humphrey Geller had come upon Lucian Lamprey as he was reading in the Magic Society library. He was in an open area full of comfortable reading chairs and didn't bother to get up from the one he was occupying. He put his book down on a side table and convivially waved at them to join him.

"You were very easy to find, Mr Lamprey" Danielle said, sitting down. Humphrey remained standing, next to her chair. "To the point of conspicuousness, in fact. One might almost think you were being fastidious about establishing an alibi."

"And exactly what dark deeds would I need an alibi, Lady Geller?"

"Jason Asano has gone missing."

"Oh? I suppose I can see why you would look at me, but I have to imagine I am but a single name on a very long list. He might have made allies out of powerful people like yourself, but he's annoyed even more. Taking opportunities that rightly belonged to Greenstone's nobility. A complete disregard for propriety, decorum and the inherent superiority of the aristocratic class. He's made enemies he's never even met."

"But you're the one who threatened him in public," Danielle said.

"That was just talk. I'd just lost out in court, and you can't deny he has both the ability and intent to get under people's skin. If I genuinely intended to have someone disposed of, then I would make it a point to be friendly, rather than threaten them. Even putting aside the warning, it helps avoid conversations like this one."

Danielle gave him a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"I assume we can count on the full support of the Magic Society in finding him?"

"Naturally," Lamprey said. "I'll hand pick anyone involved in trying to find him and supervise everything personally. Of course, he does have that little issue with tracking, doesn't he? Such a shame."

Danielle stood back up.

"Mr Lamprey, if you did happen across someone involved in this situation – through sheer happenstance, for example – then you would be well served by convincing them to reconsider the whole enterprise."

"Oh, I couldn't agree more," Lamprey said. "With Bahadir and the Remores, it means dealing with gold rankers. That's something only someone as foolish as Asano would do."

Danielle levied a penetrating gaze on Lamprey, then turned to leave, Humphrey following after. Lamprey called out after them and they turned around.

"Do let me know if a body turns up. It will reopen legal proceedings regarding a young lady in dire need of some... strict guidance."

“The Adventure Society won’t let you touch her,” Humphrey said, face creased with anger. “And even if they did, I wouldn’t.”

“The yapping of a dog, hiding under its owner’s skirts,” Lamprey said dismissively. “Have you taken a liking to my thief, little doggy?”

“I’d never let you take her as an indentured servant,” Humphrey said. “I wouldn’t let you take anyone.”

“No?” Lamprey asked. “I didn’t see you in court last year when I claimed my previous one.”

He shook his head sadly.

“Poor girl. So pretty, but she went mysteriously missing, too. Of course, she didn’t have the heroic Geller clan rushing to her rescue. Do you only help poor people when Asano tells you to? I do hope he’s alright or you’ll have to go back to protecting heiresses.”

Danielle placed a hand on Humphrey’s shoulder, silencing the reply he was about to spit out.

“You should be careful, Lamprey,” she said. “Mysterious disappearances seem to be going around.”

“Are you threatening me, Lady Geller?”

Danielle strode back across the room, Lamprey standing up to meet her. The tall, muscular elf towered over the small woman but she radiated threat like a sword. The clash of their auras drew looks from the few library patrons not already surreptitiously watching the confrontation between the Director of the Magic Society and the City’s most famous adventurer. Their auras pushed against one another, Lamprey’s yielding under the flawless, unflinching power and control of Danielle’s.

“Lamprey, if Asano is dead and I find out you’re involved, I’m going to carve you up for chum on the steps of the Adventure Society, for everyone to see, and then use you to go shark fishing. That was me threatening you.”

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Belinda made her way down an alley in Old City, stopping in front of an unmarked door and knocking twice. A panel on the door slid across, revealing a pair of eyes that went wide on recognising Belinda.

“Is she in?” Belinda asked.

“You shouldn’t be here,” the woman behind the door said. “There’s all kinds of stories going around about you and Wexler.”

“The reality is crazier than the stories, I promise.”

“Just go, Belinda.”

Belinda projected her aura through the door, suppressing that of the woman behind it.

"I'm going through that door," Belinda said. "It'll go better for both of us if you open it first."

"Let her in," came another voice from inside. It was the rich, deep voice of an older woman. The door opened, the woman behind it watching Belinda warily as she went past. The older woman had a broad, mannish body and curly hair down to her shoulders. She was in her early fifties, but fit and strong.

"Hello, Marg," Belinda greeted.

"Lindy," Marg said warmly. "Please, come up."

She led Belinda up some stairs and onto the flat roof, where picnic furniture had been set up on a rug. Marg waved Belinda to a chair, taking another for herself.

"You know, Lindy, we really have been hearing some strange stories. I even heard you were an adventurer, now."

"Not yet," Belinda said. "Sophie is. I have the essences but put off the field assessment while we went on a monster safari."

"You have essences?"

Belinda shape shifted, becoming a duplicate of Marg.

"Now that's something we could get some use out of," Marg said. "I don't suppose I can talk you into taking a job?"

"Sorry, Marg. It's the straight and narrow for me."

"That's a shame. What brings you here, then?"

"A man has gone missing. Sophie and I are looking into whether one of the Big Three are behind it."

"You think they are?"

"It's possible. He's annoyed them all in one way or another, largely in the process of helping me and Sophie. So, we owe him."

"Jason Asano," Marg said.

"You've heard of him?"

"His name started floating around when he was working at the Broadstreet Clinic. I hear you've been spending some time there yourself."

Belinda blushed.

"Can you find out about Asano for me?" she asked.

"I can ask around," Marg said. "How urgent is this?"

"I really would have gone through your door."

"That door is stronger than it looks."

"I know," Belinda said. "I put it there, remember."

"So you did. Any place I should start?"

"Adris Dorgan is too smart and has too much to lose, so it's unlikely to be him.

Ventress has the least reason to be annoyed at him, almost certainly not enough for this."

"Ventress is dead," Marg said.

"Dead?"

"No one knows how long, but word got out around a week ago. That bodyguard of hers, Darnell stepped in."

"That won't last," Belinda said. "He's not a flexible thinker."

"Focus on Silva, then?" Marg asked.

"If it's one of them, it's almost certainly him," Belinda said. "With Jason's friends, Cole is the only one stupid enough to try something."

"What is Wexler doing, if you're here?"

"We already figured that if it was any of the Big Three, it was Cole," Belinda said.

"Sophie is taking a more direct approach."

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Sophie stepped over broken glass and unconscious bodies, looking for someone cognisant enough to interrogate. She followed the closest groan of pain, finding a hefty man slumped behind the bar with a broken bottle sticking out of his side. She easily hoisted him up on top the bar, causing him to yell out as the bottle shifted.

"As I was saying," Sophie said casually, "I want to know what Silva is up to at the moment."

"I haven't even met him," the man groaned. "I answer to a guy who answers to a guy who answers to a guy. No one tells me anything."

"Who does get told?"

"You know what Silva will do to you?"

Sophie gripped the bottle and twisted, eliciting a scream.

"The docklands!" he yelled. "There's a tavern in the docklands called Sailor's Rest."

"I know it," Wexler said. "There's a mist den operating out of the back."

"Silva has been expanding the mist trade in a big way since you got out," the man said. "The guy who runs it is the area boss for all the mist dens on that side of the city, now."

Crystal mist was a drug made from recording crystals, imbuing the contents into a powder that was dissolved into water, vaporised and inhaled. It would create a world inside the mind, based on the recordings.

Crystal mist was illegal, due to its deleterious affect on the brain. Over time, it caused a residue to build up that slowly but inexorably inflicted permanent damage. Even with magic, the damage couldn't be healed until the residue was purged. Since the residue was resistant to most forms of cleansing, that was an expensive, but not impossible prospect.

Cole Silva's father had maintained a small operation, catering to members of the nobility with low tastes. They had the money and connections to discreetly arrange the expensive cleansing required. Cole had massively expanded the operations, knowing there was never a shortage of disenfranchised people looking for an escape.

There was a pile of people in front of the door, so Sophie left by hopping lightly through the window and dropping down a storey to the ground. By the time the third person had gone through it, very little of the glass was left and she landed lightly amongst the shattered remnants of the window. The men she sent through it had staggered off already. She could see one of them helping the other down the street with an injured leg. She turned in the other direction, toward the docklands, and started running.

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The ritual chant was long, sounding more like a sermon glorifying the Builder than the incantation for a ritual. As Killian continued, an aura started emitting from the star seed. It was faint but held an echo of vast power, like the light of a star. The metal frame fell away from the sphere as it rose into the air, its aura washing over Jason. His own aura was already suppressed entirely by the collar around his neck.

The tiny fragments that made up the sphere began separating, drifting up to slowly float through the air around Jason. They rose off the sphere like smoke from a fire until the seed was fully disassembled and the fragments floated around him like a cloud. Suddenly their movement stopped, as if they were frozen in time. The star seed's aura surged abruptly and the fragment darted in, burying themselves in Jason's flesh.

## 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.”

## Chapter 209

### Hanging Around

“Where the hell are the bad guys?”

Still hanging from the ceiling, Jason remembered that his torture had come with torturers. They might have seemed inconsequential when he was facing off against the Builder but now that fight was over and he was still strung up like meat on a butcher’s hook.

Even if he wasn’t and if instead of the suppression collar he was wearing at least some underpants, both men were higher rank than him. At full strength, which he definitely wasn’t, he thought he could probably take Silva. The elf was a different matter.

The weird, pale elf had the kind of rigid aura control Jason associated with expert essence users, and he knew enough of them to judge. What someone with actual skill was doing working for Silva was a mystery.

The more Jason thought about it, the more odd the elf’s presence seemed. He claimed not to be part of the Builder cult, but he had known an awful lot about how the star seed worked. Jason was willing to bet that whatever the elf was up to, he was playing Silva for a fool. It might even be the reason the pair were in absentia.

Jason considered his options. At full strength he could probably pull out the hook the elf had hammered into the ceiling and free himself. He was strong and well-trained enough that he could hoist himself up and put his feet against the ceiling for leverage.

He was nowhere near full strength at the moment, however. His body was visibly emaciated under the coating of blood and pocked with small injuries. Jason could feel that inside him, Colin had gone dormant. The familiar had exhausted himself keeping Jason alive and purging the star seed remnants. The dead fragments had been pushed out of Jason’s body by Colin’s healing, piling up under Jason’s dangling feet. Far more than the mass that had been the original seed, there was almost a fifth of Jason’s body weight in metal, sticky with Jason’s blood.

“Good job, little mate.”

Jason could feel the sting of the remnant wounds all over his body. One was right above his left eye, which he had to force open through the sticky blood welding it shut. He could feel another just to the right of his chin, underneath a scratchy beard that had grown during the time of his captivity. Neither were drastic; like the other wounds they were the places the star seed had invaded his body, then pushed back out again. The real damage

had been wreaked on the inside of his body and the outside of his soul. The wounds were present all across his body, although his most tender parts had been mercifully spared.

The wounds weren't any particular threat to his wellbeing, but they variously stung or itched, which he could do nothing about in his current predicament. He laughed at the absurdity of a few itchy scratches annoying him after the ordeal he had been through, or even the situation he was now in.

Knowledge had once denied that Jason's mind had been altered when he became an outworlder to better process the kind of trauma he was suffered since. Now, considering his odd equanimity after days of literally soul-scourging torture, he was pretty sure she'd been lying. She had likewise skipped over the part about his outworlder body, which was probably for the best. At that point he hadn't been ready to hear it, still desperately clinging to any part of his old identity.

Jason considered his options. One, literally hang around and wait for rescue. His friends were capable and would find him eventually, but would it be before Silva and the elf came back? Option two was... still in the formulation stage. Too weak to move, too powerless to act.

His new awareness of his own soul brought with it a better sense of the pressure being placed on it by the suppression collar. It was like his soul had grown to touch the sides of that containment, like a balloon being inflated inside a box. He felt an intense compulsion to push his way out of that box

Could he? He was hardly in the best state right now and the collar was an oppressive power. It presented no pressure but had the feel of an inviolable boundary, yet he couldn't shake the desire to try. He pondered where that feeling was coming from.

Jason was certain that he had undergone significant changes as a result of overcoming the challenge of the star seed, but for the first time he was without a system message to explain it. Unlike other essence users, Jason had never been forced to fathom out his abilities by feel. There was an element of it, but he always had the system messages to guide and clarify. Was the desire to push back against the suppression just wish fulfilment or an instinctual understanding of an ability that had changed? Perhaps his astral affinity had evolved from the contact with a great astral being.

He decided to go for it, closing his eyes and feeling out the power within his soul. He was uncertain of how to actively use it. Following an instinct, he used the aura projection technique that Farrah had taught him as a foundation, projecting that power outward. The instinct proved itself true as he realised through his attempt that the true nature of his aura was a projection of his soul.

That first attempt was fumbling and inexpert, but armed with his new revelation, he tried again. Jason's aura was completely suppressed by the collar, but he could feel the strength within himself to push back against that confinement. His second attempt felt more refined and powerful than the first but it was like trying to push a boulder off his body. He strained, feeling a tantalising shift in the walls that bound his aura, but could not push them back. Eventually he could not maintain the exertion and was forced to take a pause.

He realised that continuing that way was not going to yield results. He needed to significantly improve the way he wielded the power. With the revelation that his aura and his soul were more intrinsically linked than he had previously thought, he needed to alter the way he used his aura.

Jason had always considered his aura control very strong, and others had told him as much. He thought of Rufus, and his realisation that people telling him how excellent he was had been stopping him from trying to get better. With his improved sense of his own soul and the new understanding of his aura, Jason realised that his aura use had been crude and inefficient. He needed to better incorporate the power of his soul into the way he used his aura.

The foundation that Farrah had helped him lay down was a solid basis in which to inject the core power of his soul that his conflict with the Builder had revealed. Once he mastered it, it would magnify his power and control over his aura by an untold amount. The suppression collar would be the crucible in which he remade his aura. Instead of just projecting it out into nothing, that suppressive force would be the press that concentrated his power, the whetstone on which he sharpened his control.

Previously, Jason had felt like his aura control was pushing the limit of what he was capable of, only the next rank offering a chance to substantially improve. As he forced his aura up against the suppression collar's power he realised how foolish and arrogant he had been. He was once again a fumbling amateur, taking him back to those first days, training with Farrah. He had crested a hill he thought was end of his journey, only to find a grand new vista before him.

There was a long new road ahead of him and he was not going to reach the end here and now, dangling on a hook. What he needed in his current situation was to push back the suppression collar's power, if only for a fleeting moment.

When he had been training Jason, Rufus had often repeated advice his family had hammered into him. This was especially true of his grandfather, the famous, diamond-rank sword master, Roland Remore. From what Rufus had passed on, Jason secretly suspected the Remore patriarch of spending his diamond-rank lifespan figuring out how to

sound as profound as possible. This world didn't have fortune cookies, so he had to find the rhythms himself.

When Jason first began his training, Rufus had talked a lot about his grandfather's ideas about the difference between a good adventurer and a great one. In the wake of Rufus' disastrous foray against the blood cultists, it was a distinction that he obsessed on. He became preoccupied with his failures, doubting his judgement, leadership and even qualifications as an adventurer. It was a pattern that had played out again with Farrah's death.

According to Rufus' grandfather, the difference between a good adventurer and a great one was a matter of moments. The right decision in the right moment was the difference between success and failure, between triumph and death. Great adventurers were alchemists of circumstance, turning opportunity into fortune. After how things played out with the blood cult, Rufus believed it was something Jason had an instinctual gift for.

Jason hoped Rufus was right as he threw everything he had against the collar's containment, pushing his aura against it like shouldering a boulder. He pushed and strained until a final surge finally caused it to shift. He had bought himself a moment and now he had to use it.

System messages started erupting in Jason's face but he ignored them, opening his inventory next to his manacled hands and snatching out an item, barely getting it in hand before the suppression snapped back into place, pushing his aura back down. The system windows dissolved into static and vanished.

The backlash scraped against his very soul, something that would have made him pass out before his recent experiences. It did almost make him drop the small vial he now had in his hand and panic flashed through him. He convulsively clutched his fingers around the vial, almost breaking it with the panicked ferocity of his grip.

He once again hung limply from the manacles, panting for breath. Dangling from the ceiling made for a poor recovery position. As he regained his breath he looked up at the small vial. He had used his original lesser miracle potion fighting the giant water elemental, but Jory had joined them and replaced it before they had even gotten all the way through Old City.

He craned his neck, lining up his mouth up as best he could before thumbing the stopper off the vial. Some of the potion splashed onto his face but most went into his mouth and he poked his tongue out to lick up what he could of the rest.

The potion's effects were, as promised, miraculous. He felt the healing sting as emaciated muscle was replenished and the wounds all over his body finished healing.

Looking down at his chest, Jason saw that they had left behind a series of small scars. He knew those on his face had likely done the same.

His body was now flush with energy, the suppression collar having no impact on the magic of the potion, although Jason had no way to use his refilled mana pool. Instead, he went to work of expending some stamina, straining his arms to grip the chain of the manacles.

Jason's fighting style, the Way of the Reaper, was much more comprehensive than a simple martial art. It included mobility techniques, stealth and, immediately relevant, escape methodology. Jason pulled himself up, hand over hand, then shifted his weight to pivot his body, swinging his legs up until his feet were pressed into the ceiling.

The ring the manacles were looped through was held in place by a spike Jason had watch the elf fix it into place with conjured skeleton arms. It hadn't been a carefully bored hole, just a smooth, unthreaded spike that was hammered directly into the brickwork. Jason figured therefore that he could combine leverage, strength and body weight to yank it right out.

It was a task that proved easier to conceive of than to execute and Jason was left hanging upside down, reefing on the chain. He had been at it some time when the spike suddenly gave way and he fell to the floor in a heap.

He stood up, awkwardly reaching around with his manacled hands to brush off the fragments of inert star seed that stuck to his body when he landed. They had formed a pile underneath where he had been hanging and, like Jason, were sticky with Jason's blood. The remnants of the ritual circle was nothing but ash.

There was nothing else in the room and Jason wasted little time, making for the door. Passing through the outer room to the exterior of the building, he surveyed his surroundings. He quickly surmised he was somewhere on the outskirts of the delta, where the last patches of scrubland gave out and the dead sands took over. The layout of the buildings were similar to spirit coin exchange outposts he'd seen, although this one was obviously disused. Patches of yellow grass were growing up between pavers dislodged and uneven from time and weather.

To his surprise, Silva was out in the open, laying in a pool of his own blood. Jason's aura senses were not restricted alongside his aura, so he could sense that Silva was still alive. The same could not be said for another man Jason recognised as the guard who had given him a spirit coin while he was awaiting his fate. The man was definitively dead.

Jason checked on Silva. He had brutal strangulation marks on his neck and multiple stab wound in his arms, legs and torso. Silva had bled quite a lot but didn't seem to be in

any danger. His bronze rank recovery attribute would heal him faster than a normal person, although it hadn't woken him up in all the time Jason had been hanging in the building.

"Someone sure did a number on you," Jason said as he searched Silva's body. He found a small keychain in a jacket pocket, cheering as he found the key to his manacles and the the collar around his neck. The sensation of removing the collar was like taken that first breath after almost drowning; of finding a toilet just in time to avoid soiling yourself in the middle of a shopping centre.

Jason didn't waste more than a moment revelling as he felt his powers return. He minimised all the system messages flooding his vision and snapped the suppression collar around Silva's neck. Silva didn't react, remaining unconscious as Jason then placed the manacles on Silva's ankles.

"Now we'll see how you like being a prisoner," Jason told him. "No, that's no good. You'll have plenty of time for sleep in the slammer? That's worse, this is hard. Are eighties action movies not as good as I remember? Colin, when we get back to my world, I'm going to show you Gymkata. It's literally everything you need to know about western culture."

Jason resumed his search of Silva's person, finding that a pocket in the jacket led to a dimensional storage space. He emptied it out and stole everything that looked interesting or valuable, shoving it all into his inventory except for his missing amulet, which he immediately clasped around his neck.

It was time to get some clothes on but he was still covered in blood. He pulled out a bottle of crystal wash and tipped it over his head. It washed the blood off his body and out of his hair, including his new beard. There was no sign of his missing suit, so he summoned another from his inventory. The dark mist covered his modesty but at this point it didn't really matter. Even if Jason hadn't got used to the nudity, the only people here were either unconscious or dead.

Jason was tweaking his cufflinks when he froze, seeing movement in the distance. Three vehicles were careening over scrubby ground, a trio of skimmers rocketing towards him. As he watched, most of the figures on one of the skimmers vanished and he was suddenly surrounded by people. Danielle Geller had teleported Rufus, Gary and Humphrey from their skimmer directly next to him.

"Ah, you're here," Jason said, and finished adjusting his cufflink. "And here was me just needing a ride."

Jason's attempt at dignity was immediately smothered as Gary grasped him in a hug that was more like a rugby tackle.

## Chapter 210

### What Doesn't Kill You

The rest of Jason's team arrived in the three skimmers, with Clive driving one and a somewhat shaky Jory and Belinda driving the others, both for the first time. Everyone poured off the vehicles before they had even fully stopped, clamouring around Jason. He met their looks of concerns with easy confidence, assuring them that he was fine.

Clive had so many questions he didn't actually manage to get any of them out. Humphrey gripped Jason on the shoulder, giving him a beaming smile that the young women of Greenstone would sell out their own families to receive.

"We rush out here to rescue you," Belinda said, "and you're standing here like you're waiting for a ride to the damn symphony. Do have any idea how many people we kicked the hell out of looking for you."

"We?" Sophie asked.

"It was a team effort," Belinda said.

"Sophie took out two barrooms full of thugs, single-handed," Neil said. "One was full of criminals and the other was full of sailors."

"In fairness, there's a lot of crossover," Sophie said. "Are you really alright, Asano?"

"I had time to stop and pick you up a gift," Jason said. "It's a little damaged but I don't think you'll mind."

Everyone had been so fixated on Jason that they didn't even glance at the bodies on the ground. Jason walked over to the unconscious Silva and poked him with his foot.

"You got him," Sophie said.

"Yep," Jason said. "He's all yours."

"No," Danielle said. "He's all mine. I have questions Mr Silva there is going to find himself extremely compelled to answer."

"How did you end up kidnapping him?" Gary asked.

"It was an incredible fight," Jason said. "Pitting myself against a bronze-ranker, exhausted after my daring escape. Struggling back and forth until finally I clinched the hard-fought victory."

"He looks pretty fresh for having fought you," Neil said. "There isn't even any rot around the wounds."

"Yeah, I don't know what happened there," Jason said. "I found him like this."

"You found him like this?" Rufus asked.

"I should probably start at the beginning," Jason said.



Suddenly a bird swooped out of the sky, transforming into a puppy that slammed into his chest like an adorable bowling ball.

“Oh, hey mate,” Jason said, holding Stash in his arms and scratching him behind the ears. Humphrey took his familiar back with an admonishing look.

“You have to be more careful,” Humphrey scolded. “What if Jason was hurt? You don’t know what he’s been through.”

“Jason’s fine,” Neil said. After reaching bronze rank, Neil’s perception power, eyes of opportunity, allowed him to see the vulnerabilities of others. That included injuries, not just what they were but what the effects they had on the body. It was a powerful tool for a healer, letting him see the conditions of his team at a glance.

“It got a little rough, I won’t lie,” Jason said. “I chugged that miracle potion Jory gave me. Thanks for that one, Jory.”

“Maybe stop putting yourself in situations where you need them?” Jory said.

“Couldn’t agree more,” Jason said. “No more dashing heroics for this adventurer.”

“And here you just said you won’t lie,” Sophie told him.

Jason ran them through events as best he could remember them, but his memory was rather hazy. Even for the parts he was in control of his brain to form memories, the pain made his recollection rather sketchy. The most important events took place when he retreated into his soul, which he didn’t exactly remember. Instead, it was like his feelings of that time were imprinted on him. Fear, pain, power and defiance. It was difficult to put to words in any way that made sense.

Jason’s veneer of equanimity started to crack as he struggled to explain those moments and Danielle put a stop to it, setting the others to work securing the site.

With the sudden sense of safety, the door Jason had been pushing all the panic, horror and pain behind suddenly opened. His body shuddered, a chill passing over it. Danielle placed a concerned hand on his shoulder and could feel him trembling, even as his face maintained a carefree smile. His legs felt shaky and he pulled a chair from his inventory to sit down before he stumbled. He leaned back, tilting his head to the sky to feel the sun on his face.

The others threw frequent glances back at Jason as they went about their tasks. Rufus and Gary started searching the area, looking out for any sign of the missing elf Jason had described. Clive took the building where Jason had been tortured while Humphrey searched the second building with its reflective glass.

Neil and Jory started examining the unconscious Silva, while Sophie and Belinda concentrated on the dead man lying near him. Belinda found a small, fresh hole in the pavers and spotted more where Silva lay close by. Further examination revealed that the

holes were broken at the edges and tiny fragments were scattered around them. It looked like something thin and hard had broken through from below and Belinda looked from the holes in the ground to the stab wound in Silva's body.

"That elf Jason described," Belinda said to Sophie. "We're assuming Killian Laurent, right?"

"The description fits," Sophie said.

"Did I hear something about him conjuring bone spikes from the ground?"

"I think I've heard that," Sophie said.

"Who's Killian Laurent?" Jory asked from nearby.

"He's been hovering around the periphery of the Silva family for years," Belinda said. "Old Man Silva only kept him around because he was solid with ritual magic."

"There were also rumours that the old man used him to do the truly nasty stuff on the quiet," Sophie added. "The things that even criminals and murders would think twice about."

"Word is that Laurent rose up sharply after the old man died," Belinda said.

"Why would he do this to Silva?" Sophie wondered aloud. "It can't be a takeover. Silva was unpalatable but he had the family connections and at least some limits. No one would stand for that depraved elf being in charge."

"I imagine the answers will have to wait until this guy wakes up," Jory said, kneeling over Silva. The two women moved to stand over the man who was the genesis of so many of their misfortunes.

"We should kill him now," Belinda said. "It's not like anyone would care."

"No," Sophie said. "He can't suffer if he's dead."

"I won't allow you to just start hurting him," Neil said. "I'll remind you that I'm part of the church of the Healer."

"I wouldn't settle for physical pain," Sophie said. "That fades and I want him to suffer in ways that never end. I want him to see us and realise that chasing us has cost him everything."

"I think he was mostly chasing you," Belinda told her. "I'm pretty sure me, he could take or leave."

"If you want to hurt his feelings, go ahead" Neil said. "So long as you don't stab him or anything, that's your business."

Sophie looked over at Jason, then back down at Silva.

"What if I just kick him a little?"

Neil ignored that request, his eyes still panning over Silva's unconscious body. Jory, also assessing the damage, didn't have Neil's perception power. Instead, he relied on his knowledge and experience to make a physical examination.

"The strangulation, right?" Jory asked Neil.

"Yes," Neil concurred. "Whoever did it either came too close to killing him or didn't come close enough, depending on what they were after. There's damage to the brain that will take time to heal before he can wake up. He's bronze rank, though, so he'll fully recover, even without intervention."

Elsewhere, Rufus and Gary were sweeping the area, but other than the building the others were searching, there was very little to find.

"You don't buy this act of Jason's about being fine because he doesn't remember most of it, do you?" Gary asked quietly, glancing over to where Jason was slumped wearily on his chair.

"Of course not," Rufus said. "It was the same thing with the blood cultists. He was alright so long as things were still wild and dangerous, but once he was safe it all caught up with him. This time will be a lot worse."

"Did you feel his aura?"

"Yes," Rufus said gravely. "His aura power has definitely reached bronze."

"I think it might be stronger than mine," Gary said. "I know my aura control isn't the best, but that shouldn't affect the raw power and I'm almost silver rank. Even if his aura power is bronze, he's still iron. What do you have to do to a person's soul for that?"

"Hopefully, have them fight off a star seed," Rufus said.

"You think it actually took him over?"

"I'm hoping not."

"How do we help him?" Gary asked.

"First, we make sure it's really him in there. Then, we be there for him. Let him know he's safe and among friends. Beyond that, we leave it to my mother. She's good at helping people through things like this."

"You're right," Gary said.

Rufus' mother, Arabella, had made a reputation for herself by helping other adventurers through traumatic events that were an inevitable part of the job. It was only once she arrived to help her son in the wake of Farrah's death that Rufus was able to start truly moving past it.

Humphrey searched through the security building. Along with Jason's missing suit he found another dead body, with a stab wound in the back of the neck. He knew this was

likely Coburn, the man Jerrick had killed in order to sneak back to the city and give them Jason's location.

Only Clive was excited by what he found. In the makeshift ritual room where Jason had been tortured he found the ashen remains of the ritual circle and the inert remnants of the star seed. After making a record of everything with a recording crystal, he started pulling out special sample boxes, collecting ash and sealing away the star seed fragments.

Back outside, Danielle looked with concern at Jason, slumped in the chair.

"I don't like that I have to tell you this," Danielle said, "but after what you told us..."

"You have to assume that I've been compromised by the Builder," Jason finished for her. "I know."

"The church of the Healer has taken over from Purity in dealing with the star seeds," Danielle said. "Healer provided his people with the rituals they needed."

"Good," Jason said. "If you tried to turn me over the Purists, I would not go quietly,"

"I'm glad," Danielle said. "I'm starting to realise that not going quietly is kind of your thing."

Jason looked up from and they shared a smile, hers as motherly as his was weary.

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Once the group made sure there were no surprises left behind at the site, Danielle gathered everyone to teleport back to Greenstone.

"What about the skimmers?" Clive asked. "I can't just leave the Magic Society's vehicles here."

"Yes you can," Danielle said. "I'll make sure it's smoothed over. Once the Adventure Society hears about what happened here, they'll be crawling over this place, and roping Magic Society people in with them. They'll bring them back."

Danielle's teleportation power was unable to affect others without their consent, so Jory fed Silva a potion to wake him up. He opened bleary eyes to find he had been sat in Jason's chair with Jason and Sophie looking down at him.

"Good morning, sunshine," Jason said. "You're about to have a rough day, mate."

Silva's eye went wide. He tried to leap out of the chair, only for Gary's huge hands to land on his shoulders and push him back down. Silva was strong but Gary was stronger.

"Asano!" Silva snarled. "Wexler? What happened? How are you not a meat puppet?"

"Rugged good looks," Jason said. "What happened to you creepy elf mate?"

The fury continued to burn in Silva's eyes but he pulled himself under control.

"You have to go after him. This was all his idea. I had no idea he was going to use a star seed."

“Mate, your words won’t be as garbled if you stop talking out your arse. You can lie all you like once we get back to town. Just shut up and accept the teleport.”

“Teleport?”

Silva looked around, noticing the others.

“Why would I go along with you?”

“Because if you don’t”, Sophie said, her voice an icy needle, “then you get to say here with me.”

Silva paled, then angrily covered the flash of fear.

“You’re nothing, Wexler. If it wasn’t for my father I’d have used you up and then tossed you into a brothel. If you were even still alive at this point, you’d be drugged to the eyeballs, laying in a filthy bed, waiting for the next guy to take his turn.”

Sophie leaned forward, bring her face right up to Silva’s, her mouth a hungry smile and her eyes, silver daggers.

“Oh, I know,” she said. “That’s why I’m hoping you make me take you back to town the long way. The very, very long way.”

\*\*\*

Jason was finally home, alone in his room in the cloud boathouse. With a thought, dark mist swirled around him and all his clothing but his underwear vanished. He staggered over and fell into the cool embrace of his cloud bed. As the softness enveloped him, all the things he had been holding back were fully unleashed. Everything he had pushed away since his capture flooded over him in full force. Leaving him shuddering, curled up in a foetal position. The exhaustion not of his body but of his soul finally caught up with him and plunged him into a restless slumber.

He was woken by morning light coming through the transparent ceiling he hadn’t turned opaque before falling asleep. He was still shaky but somewhat purged, his reaction of the day before having worked something out of his system. He reconsidered that perhaps Knowledge hadn’t been lying after all. He was better than the day before, but that wasn’t the same as good. His experiences of the last few days were a blurry mess, yet he knew they would haunt him for the rest of his life.

When his team brought him home, Danielle had suggested he remain there with an Adventure Society official to watch over him, if only for the sake of propriety. She knew he wasn’t likely to want to leave anyway, and it was only until the church of the Healer gave him a thorough examination.

“Just until we confirm you’re all clear of the star seed,” she had told him.

The team gathered together on the deck for a big breakfast cooked by Gary, which meant meat, more meat and some eggs. With meat.

Jason had his first genuine smile in what felt like forever as he looked around at everyone happily tucking into breakfast. He was struck with the feeling that he might, eventually, be okay. The team naturally coddled him but he begged off after breakfast, asking for some time alone. He went up to the top deck of the houseboat, staying outside where the Adventure Society official could see him. He wasn't going to give the stranger access to the internal areas of his houseboat.

It was a mild winter day, actually rather pleasant with clear blue skies. With a mental command a cloud-stuff lounge rose up out of the floor. He lay down, and used the wrist razor Gilbert had incorporated into all his outfits to slash the back of his hand, letting a single member of team Colin to emerge. Colin crawled up Jason's arm to rest on his shoulder.

"Feeling better, little mate? How about we take a look to see if you got any stronger from all that?"

Jason looked at the system messages, still minimised at the corner of his vision. Taking a deep breath, he started pulling them up, one by one. Many of them were just warnings about his powers being suppressed, which wasn't much use given he couldn't see them until his abilities were unsuppressed again. Others were more important.

- 
- **Outworlder racial ability [Quest System] has evolved to [Defiant].**

Ability: [Defiant]

- **Transfigured from [Outworlder] ability [Quest System].**
- **Previous effects of racial ability [Quest System] have been lost.**
- **Ignore the enhanced resistances derived from rank disparity. This only affects the enhanced resistance from being higher rank, not other sources of resistance.**
- **Ignore the enhanced aura suppression and aura suppression resistance derived from rank disparity. This only affects the enhanced effects from being higher rank, not the inherently superior strength of higher-rank auras.**
- **Looting abilities used on higher-rank monsters defeated by you will have increased effect.**

---

"Wait, no more quests? I have a lot of overhead costs coming up when I hit bronze."

The vast majority of the quests Jason had done were simple ones related to his Adventure Society work, earning him a nice bundle of money. As for the more exceptional quests, they had been the source of some of Jason's most important items. His essences, if nothing else. It looked like that part, at least, would still be a factor, with the new version enhancing the loot of more powerful monsters.

The quest system was Jason's variant on the guidance power that all outworlders apparently received. If the quests went away, did it mean he was no longer in need of guidance? Had this world truly become home? He suddenly felt further from his own world than ever.

Jason sorted through the system messages for the relevant ones. Some of them were just garbled nonsense, he guessed due to a combination of the suppression collar and the extreme stress being exerted on his soul, the source of all his powers.

He dug out another relevant message.

"Hey, this one's about you."

- 
- Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) has reached Iron 8 (100%).
  - Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) has reached Iron 9 (00%).
  - Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
  - Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
  
  - Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) has gained a new effect.

Ability: [Sanguine Horror] (Blood)

- Familiar (ritual, summon).
- Base cost: Extreme mana, extreme stamina, extreme health.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Summon a sanguine horror to serve as a familiar.
- Effect (bronze): Summon a bronze rank vessel for your familiar with enhanced abilities.
  
- Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached bronze rank.

---

"Look at you, mate, jumping all the way to bronze rank like a big boy."

Colin wiggled happily.

"Good thing I already picked up the materials for your next summoning ritual. I might have to brush up on the ritual knowledge, though, to make sure I do it right."

Jason pulled up another advancement message.

- 
- Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
  - Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
  - Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) has gained a new effect.

Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (ritual, summon).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are suffering from.
- Effect (bronze): Inflicts an instance of [Sin] on enemies that make physical or magical attacks against allies within the aura. Instances applied in this way cannot be resisted.
- Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached bronze rank.

---

“Strewth, that’s a fair dinkum upgrade.”

Sin was Jason’s power that increased the effect of necrotic damage, and now any enemy attacking his team would stack up instances on themselves. That would combine nicely not just with his own powers but the abilities that Belinda and Neil had gotten from the awakening stones of the Reaper.

There was one more important system message before Jason cleared off the stack.

---

New Title: [Spirit Warrior]

- Fighting off a concerted attack on your soul by a transcendent entity has awakened your awareness of your own soul and refined your ability to use it as a weapon.
  - The suppressive force and resistance to suppression of your aura is increased. You can use the suppression resistance of your aura to resist forms of magical suppression beyond just aura suppression.
  - After fully suppressing the aura of others, you may use your aura to attack their soul directly.
  - Your aura signature has changed. Your unyielding nature in the face of even the greatest power can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power or when projecting your aura. The echo of transcendent power within your aura is increased.
-



Jason sat looking at the description for a long time. His recollection of the Builder's attack on his soul wasn't a memory exactly. It was more like something imprinted on his soul, deeper and more enduring. His own attacks would doubtless be an empty echo of what the builder had done to him, but it still wasn't something he wanted to do to another person.

"It's good," he told himself, unconvincingly. "Of course it's good."

He couldn't shake the questions rising up in the back of his mind. Exactly who and what were his experiences turning him into? He was already no longer human. When he finally found his way home, would anyone even recognise whatever it was he had become?