

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.”

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.”