

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.

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.

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- **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."

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- 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.

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- 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.
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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?