

Chapter 212

Scars

Carlos worked with Clive, directing Clive to draw out a ritual circle on the rooftop.

“This is a damage echo ritual,” Carlos explained. “It will let me examine the history of physical damage to Mr Asano’s body.”

As Jason stood the middle of the circle, a man-shaped image of light appeared above him, with red and blue lines running through it like veins. Carlos waved his hand, manipulating the image. The mark of Jason’s first scar appeared, bright and glaring across his torso. Carlos slowly and methodically went through everything, although much of the image was an abstraction, incomprehensible without the appropriate knowledge.

“This is actually rather easy,” Carlos observed as he worked. “Because your body is less than a year old, everything is quite clear. Excellent for obtaining definitive results.”

Eventually he ended the ritual.

“This is consistent from what we’ve seen in others we believe to have rejected the seeds,” Carlos said. “They were all dead, though, so we were working from corpses. The information we have isn’t ideal.”

“You said there had been six that you knew of?” Clive asked.

“Those are just the ones we found,” Carlos said. “We don’t know what the actual numbers are. Obviously, it requires a series of ameliorating factors to even give someone a chance. As to how many more individuals resisted the star seeds and were killed without being found we just don’t know.”

“How accurately can you determine my condition if corpses are your basis for comparison?” Jason asked.

“Even from the corpses we could find specific differences between those who rejected the seed and those who were forced to accept it and then had it removed. If you think of the body as a field, the seed ploughs that field over, ready for planting. If the field accepts the seed, we see changes as the seed takes root. If the seed is rejected, however, all we get is overturned earth. The ground has been torn up but the seed won’t grow.”

“So, he’s in the clear?” Rufus asked. “No star seed?”

Vincent, standing next to Rufus could sense his agitation. He slipped his hand into Rufus’ and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Rufus gave him a grateful glance.

“Provisionally, I am willing to say that indications are good. Because Mr Asano’s body is young enough, the results are unambiguous. The Adventure Society and my church, however, require me to also conduct an examination of your soul, Mr Asano.”

“If you’re going to have a rummage in my soul,” Jason said, “we should probably be on a first name basis.”

“The soul examination isn’t invasive,” Carlos said. “It can’t be. If the Builder can’t get in there, I certainly can’t. It will expose your soul to scrutiny, however, which I have found makes people feel very exposed. The feeling is something like having your aura completely suppressed. I can tell you this from experience, having had the same ritual performed on me.”

“We could have used that ritual a few months ago,” Danielle said.

“It’s a gold rank ritual,” Carlos said. “Not easy to disseminate or use, especially in a place like Greenstone. Also, this version of the ritual is new, devised specifically for this circumstance. I had myself be the first person put through it, to experience what others would be going through, but you are our first actual living subject, Jason. The next ritual will create a projection of your soul that I can examine to confirm that it has not been breached. The sensation is something like projecting your aura, except there will be a powerful flood of energy to make the projection much more powerful than normal.”

“That’s a reliable test?” Rufus asked.

“Very,” Carlos said. “If Mr Asano – Jason – has ever let anything alien into his soul, it will be very evident. This ritual is only now being spread by the Magic Society to test for suspected star seed recipients. Fortunately, the Builder takes time to overcome the sense of self-preservation when he forces unwilling victims to open up their souls. Only those who have been seeded for extended periods are willing to detonate themselves when captured.”

“If he does have a star seed in him,” Danielle asked, “will this ritual harm Jason before we can have it extracted?”

“No. It will just be a projection of the soul, nothing more. But as I said, it’s a profoundly uncomfortable experience. The sense of exposure, of vulnerability, is very real.”

“Not an issue,” Jason said.

“That’s easy to say,” Carlos said. “What the ritual reveals won’t just be visible, although that will be part of it. Anyone with aura senses will be able to sense your fully exposed soul. This is especially true because the ritual incorporates an amplification element. Jason, your soul is only iron rank and I need to examine it clearly, so the projection will be more powerful than your normal aura projection. For that reason, I suggest we move to an enclosed ritual room instead of a high, open space on a busy marina.”

“No,” Jason said, his voice almost a growl. “I want people to see.”

His friends looked at him with concern but remained silent.

“Let’s get started then,” Carlos said.

Clive used his powers to rebalance the ambient magic and start drawing out the ritual circle from a book Carlos handed him.

“The visible representation will be quite noticeable,” Carlos explained as he supervised Clive’s work. “Particularly given our choice of venue. The appearance will be rather similar to your personal crest, if you have one. I do not, so I was rather curious when I underwent this ritual myself. My soul, as it turns out, looks like a sparkly apple. Presumably because I’m sweet and fresh.”

Jason chuckled as his friends looked on awkwardly. After his brooding behaviour and recent outburst, they weren’t sure how to look at him.

“That’s an excellent job,” Carlos assessed, looking over the finished ritual circle. It was easily the most sophisticated circle Jason had ever seen. Normally, Clive’s power drew out magic diagrams in glowing golden lines. Most of the circle was still gold, but it featured a rainbow of colours in various sections, from vibrant red to cool green and bright, sky blue.

“I’d be tempted to let you conduct the ritual yourself, Mr Standish, if channelling the power of a gold rank ritual wouldn’t make you explode.”

“You mentioned that this is a gold rank ritual, earlier,” Rufus said. “I didn’t think a ritual of that rank was possible with the low magical density in this region.”

“Normally, no,” Carlos said. “You could probably perform a silver-rank ritual here, if you were careful, but not a gold. We’ll be using mana condensers.”

Carlos started taking what looked like simple lamps from his dimensional bag and placing them in the corners of the rooftop deck. Where the glow stone would go in a normal lamp, these had swirling lights of blue, silver and gold. It looked very much like the light shed by the transcendent damage of Jason’s execute power.

“Mana condensers are a tool for performing rituals requiring a higher magic density than is available in the local area,” Clive explained as Carlos set them out. “You charge them up, quite slowly, in a low magic area, and they can create an artificial field of high-density ambient magic. Very inefficient, but if it’s what you need, it’s what you need.”

He set out the lamps, along with other materials, most of which seemed to be different coloured crystals. There were also a number of gold spirit coins that, if you ignored certain items like the cloud palace, was more than all the wealth in Jason’s possession.

“Seems like a waste of coin,” Jason said.

“If you’re short on money, the church of the Healer will be happy to help you out,” Carlos said. “The information we get here will be critical going forward. If you’re willing to dedicate a number of hours to go over your experience and answers some questions as best you can. Maybe undergo an extra ritual or three to examine your condition. We can and will pay well for information on a subject that is very hard to come by right now.”

“It’ll help people, right?” Jason asked.

“Very much so,” Carlos said. “Even with the guidance of our god, the current methods we have for extracting star seeds are crude and brutal. Not everyone survives. The information we can potentially get from studying you could help us improve those methods significantly.”

“Helping people and getting paid for my trouble,” Jason said. “Sounds like adventuring to me.”

“Wait, you’re letting this guy study you?” Clive complained. “I ask you all the time.”

“He wants help healing people,” Jason said. “Not help streamlining his bureaucratic process.”

“Bureaucratic process?” Clive explained. “Do you have any idea how critical the work of the Magic Society is to...”

Clive trailed off as he saw Jason’s familiar sly grin and started muttering complaints to himself.

“Just about ready,” Carlos said. “For this one, everyone else should go down to that lower deck. Mr Standish, you can stay, if you think you have the expertise to avoid tainting the ritual.”

“I probably can but I’d rather not take the risk,” Clive said, following the others down the stairs to the lower deck.

From below they could hear, but not see the ritual being conducted. The chant was not in words, but unintelligible sounds.

“Non-linguistic chants are very difficult,” Clive said, “but they become more and more common in the higher-rank rituals.”

Around them on the marina, the surge of magic from the roof deck was drawing attention. The wealthy marina patrons tended to be essence users, many with perception powers that could sense the changes in the ambient magic. Those pointed out the surge in ambient magic density to others.

When the ritual was completed, every essence user in the marina and many in the Marina North district of the city felt an aura blast out. Incredibly domineering, but not the

individual power of a sovereign. It was more like a celestial law had passed over the area, filled with unyielding resolve and an echo of divine power.

Beyond the feel of the aura, it carried with it an overbearing suppressive force. Bronze-rankers and above were able to withstand the surging aura, while iron-rankers without solid aura control found themselves shaken and shivering. The only member of Jason's team present was Clive, who weathered the aura surge despite being at the epicentre. After resuming his adventuring after years as Magic Society official, he had benefited from Farrah's aura training, alongside Jason.

The people without aura senses actually fared better than the essence users, their lack of sensitivity giving them no more than a foreboding sense of unease.

High above the roof deck, darkness started spreading like a sinister cloud, covering a huge space. It was not a complete darkness, with a spread of dim, feeble stars like an oppressive night sky. Within the darkness, indistinct shapes moved and shifted, defined only by being darker than the sky around them. It was hard to make out their shapes or follow their movements, but what onlookers could see of the unnerving, alien forms made them glad that they could not.

In the centre of the darkness, a cluster of stars started glowing brighter, taking on the form of a cloak. The cloak opened and expanded, revealing that within was a clear blue sky and bright sun, like a universe contained within a dark void.

The dark shapes immediately started converging on the starlight cloak, tearing at it with shadowy claws. They rent the cloak but from every tear, sunlight flared out in the form of bright, grasping tendrils, clutching at the dark figures. They wrapping around the dark, alien shapes, which dissolved away like morning mist exposed to the sun. As they did, horrifying shrieks started emerging from the projection with each dark entities that was annihilated.

People looked up at the projection from all across the marina, feeling the source of the strange aura that had washed over them.

"This is Jason's soul?" Rufus asked. "You saw his personal crest, right, Clive?"

"Yeah," said weakly. "It was kind of like this, but it didn't have those things in it. Are they the star seed? Did it get in after all?"

"No," Carlos called out from above. His gold rank senses easily heard their conversation, even over the screeching. "They're the aftermath of the war he fought for his soul. The soul doesn't scar the same way the body does."

Carlos had not been anticipating anything like the power of the soul projection the ritual produced. He was worried that the gold-rank ritual was filtering too much power

through Jason's soul to create the projection but Jason seemed unperturbed. He was standing in the middle of the circle, eyes closed and completely relaxed.

Satisfied that Jason's soul was unviolated, Carlos brought the ritual to an end, the aura fading away and the image fading into nothing.