

## Chapter 213

### I Won't Let Them Turn Me Into That

Jason didn't go straight back to adventuring, instead spending his time in training and recovery. His team spent their days participating in the hunt for Killian Laurent, whose possession and use of the star seed had made him a priority in the efforts to locate and fight against the cultists. He potentially had valuable information and unlike the suicide-prone cultists, he might be possible to capture.

At the same time, Silva had been locked up in the Adventure Society's prison tower, being asked some very pointed questions. It didn't help with the search for Laurent, only revealing the depth of ignorance Silva had about his former henchman. Silva did volunteer other information that was more actionable, however.

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Unless someone had a specific power to do so, most long distance communication was conducted through speaking chambers. Two chambers could be connected, allowing the person in each chamber to project into a water clone in the other.

Most speaking chambers were housed within and operated by the Magic Society branches. One of the perks of being a branch director was the use of a private speaking chamber, annexed to their office. Lucian lamprey was using his, but the man on the other end was not telling him what he wanted to hear.

"We don't have anyone who's been there to open a portal, Lucian. Why would we? It's just an out of the way, provincial city that probably wouldn't exist if not for the spirit coin farms."

"Surely you can find someone?" Lamprey asked.

"Probably, but I won't. You were banished there for a reason, Lucian. You're all out of friends, here."

"All I need is one portal out."

The person on the other end of the communication sighed.

"I have someone who can portal to Hornis. If you can get there, I can maybe arrange something. It'll cost you, though."

"You owe me. From the old days."

"The old days are over, Lucian. I don't owe you a thing. Get to Hornis and message me again. We can work something out. If you have something to offer."

Lamprey went to speak but the person on the other end severed the connection. The water that made up the clone lost its animating force and splashed back into the pool.

Lamprey stormed out of the tiled booth.

“Hornis,” he muttered to himself. It was a port city, like Greenstone, south and around the coast. He would either have to take a ship and risk someone exposing his departure, or go overland, east into the veldt and then south. He decided that was the safer route, as the desert was not a threat to a silver ranker.

He opened the hidden safe in his office, shoving the contents into a dimensional bag before making for the door. Just as he left his office, he spotted Danielle Geller at the far end of the long hallway. She spotted him, in turn.

“Going out?” she called out to Lamprey. “That works out, because you need to come with me.”

“I’m busy right now, Lady Geller,” Lamprey said. “Another day.”

“Oh, I insist,” Danielle said.

They stared at each other down the hall for a long moment. Then, as if someone waved a starter’s flag, they both sprang into motion. Lamprey clapped his hands together in front of him, creating a wave of force that sent cracks along the stone walls, floor and ceiling. The art lining the walls was ripped apart, the windows shattered and floor tiles exploded, throwing up dust and debris that shrouded the hallway.

His attack was late before it had even begun; trying to move faster than Danielle Geller was an exercise in futility. By the time the hallway started erupting she had already teleported behind him, her blade cutting into his thick neck muscle. Lamprey was power to Danielle’s speed, however, and her sword barely dug into the flesh. He reached up and grabbed the blade while ramming his other elbow back into Danielle’s chest. His incredible strength fired her back like a rocket, through the doorway and across his office to bounce roughly off the wall.

Lamprey turned around, Danielle’s sword still gripped in his hand by the blade. He probed the wound with his free hand as he watched her push herself back to her feet.

“I knew you were tough,” she said, “but I thought that would do more.”

“You’ll have to cut me like that a thousand times if you want me to go down,” Lamprey sneered. Danielle gave him a predatory smile in return.

“Deal.”

She vanished, as did her sword, leaving behind a cut in Lamprey’s hand. Bloody lines started appearing on his body, Danielle’s movement nothing but a blur.

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Even once his Adventure Society minder was gone, Jason rarely left the houseboat. Most of his time was spent refining his aura control. He quickly reached the point where he

could completely negate the effects of an iron-rank suppression collar and had begun working with a bronze-rank one. He could only hold off its effects for a few moments, but he knew exactly how valuable a few moments could be.

When he did leave, he remained unnoticed. He moved through Old City unseen, practicing his shadow teleportation. He needed it to reach bronze rank, hopefully opening a path back to the Order of the Reaper's astral space and the Builder cultists within.

Jason's friends clearly wanted to be supportive, although were largely at a loss as to how. Joining the pursuit for Killian was their way to try and find some closure on Jason's ordeal. In the meantime, Carlos and Arabelle both came by daily, carefully talking Jason through the events of his capture and escape.

Arabelle helped him explore the traumatic memories. For those strange feelings imprinted on his soul from when he had no mind to form memories, Carlos had techniques to help. Guided meditation was a large part of it, as was teaching Jason about the soul from a magical theory perspective. Jason's grasp of magical theory was continually improving and he was able to follow along at least with the fundamentals of what Carlos was talking about.

"Some people find a more intuitive approach helpful," Carlos told him. "Others, like you, seem to get more from understanding the way the soul functions, magically. Understanding and breaking down what they went through helps them process it."

One day, Carlos and Arabelle arrived at the houseboat with Arabelle's old team of her, her husband, the stealthy and enigmatic Callum Morse and Emir. Also with them were Danielle Geller, Constance and Hester.

"We wanted to come earlier," Emir told Jason. "Arabelle said it was best to wait."

Although his original purpose in Greenstone had been concluded, Emir's operation at Sky Scar Lake continued. Knowing that the Builder cult had infiltrated the astral space there, his people had been trying to find a way back in. Jason had been keeping something under his hat, not wanting to speak up until he was certain, but changed his mind.

"You asked me, before, if Shade had any insights that might help you get back into the astral space," Jason told him. "I didn't say anything at the time, but there might be something."

"Oh?" Emir asked.

"We can't test it out until my shadow teleport power reaches bronze rank," Jason said.

"Not what we're here for," Arabelle said, heading off the conversation.

“What are you here for?” Jason asked. “Not that I don’t appreciate the well-wishes.”

Carlos and Arabelle, as it turned out, had arranged an adventurer group therapy session. Jason had been through a lot, but no adventurer reached silver and gold rank without their own horror stories.

In the past, Jason had felt a step between himself and the experienced upper-rankers he knew. As they each shared their own tribulations, he felt a new sense of belonging. It was something he had been missing even before his recent troubles. His very nature as an outworlder marked him as an outsider. To share his story with others and have them share their’s in turn was like a puzzle piece fitting into the right space.

As they left the boathouse afterwards, Danielle took Jason aside.

“Someday, Humphrey and the others will face similar problems,” she told him and Jason nodded, understanding. Neither of them needed to say more.

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It had been almost two months since Jason last set foot on the Adventure Society campus. He glanced over at the prison tower where both Lucian Lamprey and Cole Silva were incarcerated. Neither’s ultimate fate had yet been decided.

After the disastrous expedition and the subsequent wave of demotions, the campus had, for a time, become an almost desolate place. Then, after the Reaper trials, it had been overrun with time-displaced priests. With the expedition months gone and the priests sent off to whatever their new lives had become, it was back to the same bustle of activity Jason remembered from his early days as an adventurer. A lot of people were looking his way, either with furtive glances or openly staring. One woman even pointed right at him as she whispered to her companions. He ignored it as he made his way into the administration building and rode the elevating platform to the fifth floor.

“Morning, Bert,” Jason greeted, spotting Albert behind the executive level reception desk. “I see from your aura that the training is coming along.”

“Oh, you’re one to talk, Mr Asano. Bertram was working guard duty on the bridge when you set off your little display. You gave him a right good scare.”

“You can put that down to the ritual I was going through, not me.”

“If you say so, Mr Asano. Welcome back, by the way. It’s good to see you out and about, after what happened.”

“What exact are people saying, Bert?”

“All sorts, Mr Asano; you know what rumours are like. Magic mind control, crime lords, now Director Lamprey locked up in the prison tower. It’s all very exciting but no one seems sure if you’re victim or perpetrator, if you don’t mind me saying. And that’s without

that business with the aura projection. Nobody knows what to make of that. Plus there's talk of some village that got destroyed, the Duke sending out all those people and materials to rebuild."

"Thank you, Bert."

"If you don't mind me asking, Mr Asano, what did happen?"

Jason thought about it for a moment.

"Cole Silva and Lucian Lamprey tried to deal with me using the Builder cult as a weapon."

"It doesn't seem to have worked out so well for them," Albert said. "You being here and them locked up in the tower. It all came good in the end, then."

"It isn't the end," Jason said grimly. "Not until the cultists have been dragged out of their holes and tossed right out of our world."

"Well, I don't think I'd bet against you, Mr Asano."

"You know what, Bert? Neither would I."

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Jason sat down across from Elspeth Arella. Tabitha Gert and her inquiry team had decamped from Greenstone while he had been on the road contract and Arella was once again in charge.

"Mr Asano."

"Director."

"We have something of a contentious past, you and I."

"We do," Jason agreed. "Rufus Remore agreed to put his support behind you in return for your father's help, however, and your father delivered. Since Rufus' support absolutely includes me, then you can consider yourself to have mine, for whatever worth you find that to have."

Arella examined Jason for a moment in silence. He was worlds apart from the brash, arrogant boy he had seemed in the past. The arrogance was still there, an unmistakable challenge in the eyes. But the precocious boy had been replaced with a steely-faced man.

"I have been looking at my tenure, following the enquiry as a fresh start," she said finally. "Perhaps you and I could do the same."

"That seems fair," Jason said.

"Very well, then on to business. I understand that Danielle Geller has been keeping you apprised of the investigation into Silva and now Lamprey."

"That's right."

“As the primary charges against them are against an Adventure Society member, the Adventure Society will be dealing with them. As it also involves the Builder cult, the decisions regarding them will be made above my level. I understand that Tabitha Gert will be portalling in to take them both. As the victim, however, you have the right to be heard in regards to their ultimate dispensation.”

“I prefer not to think of myself as a victim,” Jason said. “Also, giving the victims a say might feel right, but that’s a tool of vengeance, not justice.”

“You don’t want revenge?”

“Of course I do,” Jason said. “If you’d asked me what to do with them three weeks ago, I’d have said hang them from a tree and beat them until fabulous prizes come out. But that’s not the person I want to be and I won’t let them turn me into that. So long as they aren’t put in a position to keep hurting people, I don’t care what happens to them.”

“How very considered. Does Miss Wexler feel the same way?”

“I don’t think you should try for a fresh start with her,” Jason said. “She knows that you tried to sell her off to Lamprey and has different feelings about vengeance than I do. But you and I both made mistakes that she almost paid the price for, so I won’t go casting any stones.”

“We’ll leave it at that, then, and move on to the next issue. North East Quarry Village Number Four. You did excellent work, there.”

“Thank you,” Jason said.

“You and Henrietta Geller did a superlative job of building the Adventure Society’s reputation.”

“Also, helping people,” Jason said.

“Yes, of course. The Society would like to show its gratitude by supplying the materials required to resummon all your familiars. The ones you lost in that encounter, as well as the one that has now reached bronze rank.”

“You seem to know a lot about the state of my familiars.”

“This reward was suggested by your team. Mr Standish provided the list of supplies. I had to have someone portal them in, but after the expedition I’ve made a policy of always keeping a portal user on hand. Sending them all off together was a mistake I won’t make again.”

Jason gave it a short moment’s consideration, then nodded.

“Thank you,” he said.

“If you speak to the receptionist, he will direct you to pick them up. That just leaves the issue of your star ranking. Tabitha Gert promised that if you conduct yourself

acceptably, your rank will be restored to three stars. I think we can safely say that has happened. You will be needing a new badge because of the changes to your aura and your personal crest, so please present yourself to the Magic Society at your convenience.”

“Speaking of my aura,” Jason said, “are there any repercussions I need to know about following the aura projection incident?”

“Not that you need to concern yourself with.”