

## 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 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.