

Chapter 207

Search

Killian began the elaborate preparations to use the star seed. He started by conjuring up skeletal arms that he used to hammer a spike into the ceiling, which he then hung a pair of manacles from. He unlatched the chain from Jason's suppression collar and then used the skeleton arms to force Jason's wrists into the manacles. Jason didn't bother to struggle, saving his strength.

Once Jason was hanging uncomfortably from the ceiling, Killian took a series of pouches from his bone storage cabinet, pouring powder from them to make a complex ritual circle under Jason's feet. When that was done he started placing objects into the circle. Some were simple bricks of precious materials, others were tools made from exotic metals.

"How exactly do you know how to do all this?" Jason asked.

"That's actually a good question," Silva said, watching from the side. "How did you learn a Builder cult ritual?"

"From a Builder cultist, obviously," Killian said. "You opened your operations to people your father would never deal with and the Builder cult seized the opportunity. When Thalia Mercer started kicking down doors, why did you think so many of them were yours?"

"You facilitated this?" Silva asked.

"Your exact words were 'more money, less questions,'" Killian said.

"He's put you in bed with the enemy of the whole world," Jason said. "Do you even know what the Builder cult is doing? They're plundering whole chunks of this world like dimensional pirates and they don't care who or what is destroyed in the process. That's not an association you can run far enough to escape, Silva."

"Shut up," Silva snarled.

"What's done is done," Killian said calmly. "The only way forward is forward."

Killian placed the final object, the star seed, directly underneath Jason.

"And now we begin," he said.

Thalia met Clive and Neil in one of the Mercer family receiving parlours.

"Neil," Thalia Mercer greeted. "Always a pleasure. And Mr Standish, hello again. You'll have to accept my apology but I can only spare a little time. The Builder cult has gone underground, which has made rooting them out all the more work."

“Then we’ll go directly to the point,” Neil said. “Jason Asano has gone missing.”

Thalia frowned.

“You’re sure it’s foul play? I recall he went off without telling anyone once before, during the time he was seeing Cassandra.”

“We’re sure,” Neil said.

“I’m not sure exactly how I can help,” Thalia said.

“We’re looking into anyone with the motivation to do something to Jason,” Clive said. “You’re the spearhead of the Builder cult investigation, now.”

“You think the Builder cult might be behind it?” Thalia asked. “Revenge for taking a star seed from them? It seems like they would have larger concerns.”

Clive and Neil both took on awkward expressions.

“That’s true, Lady Mercer,” Clive said. “We were thinking of another potential scenario. To be blunt, we’re talking about Thadwick.”

Thalia’s expression went dark. “Thadwick is a prisoner. A victim.”

“Most likely, yes,” Neil said. “We’re simply exploring every possibility, however remote.”

“We don’t understand how much of the original personality survives once a start seed takes over,” Clive said. “It may well be that Thadwick’s own personality is suppressed but the thing that’s taken him over inherited his hatred of Jason and is acting on it.”

“We both know that Thadwick had become fixated on Jason,” Neil said to Thalia. “Jason had become the symbol of his recent setbacks.”

“Even if what you’re saying were true,” Thalia said, “what could I do that I haven’t already done? You think I haven’t been trying to get my son back? He’s been gone for months, now. For all we know, he was in the pile of bodies that Remore and his parents left on that island. They’re still sorting through the bodies, trying to identify them all.”

“The thing is,” Neil said, “we’ve all been operating under the assumption that Thadwick has been wholly supplanted by the star seed.”

“If he is more of a gestalt entity,” Clive picked up, “then that may open avenues of investigation that you otherwise may have overlooked. Places that Thadwick would think to go.”

“I may be emotionally invested in my son’s return,” Thalia said, “but I am not blinded by emotion. From the point we realised the cult was acting on Thadwick’s knowledge we immediately tried every avenue we could think of that might be driven by his thinking, instead of the cult.”

She got to her feet.

“That is all the time I have to spare,” she said, her voice cold and dismissive. “You know the way out, Neil.”

“Mr Remore,” Dorgan greeted. “Of course you are welcome in my home, but I didn’t realise we were meeting this openly.”

“Do you know why I’m here?” Rufus asked.

“The absentee Mr Asano, I can only assume,” Dorgan said. “My understanding is that he’s been known to go off without notice before.”

“This isn’t that,” Rufus said.

“Well, let me begin by asserting that I am neither responsible nor complicit.”

“Do you know who is?”

“I only met Mr Asano the one time,” Dorgan said. “He struck me as someone who likes to play games above his rank with a rather insufferable smugness. Frankly, I’m surprised it took this long for him to mysteriously disappear.”

“I need answers, not more questions.”

“Well, while there are any number of candidates, there are not so many stupid enough to risk the wrath of you and your friends. Or your parents. Good gods, no sane person would cross a pair of gold rankers.”

“Who would?”

“Cole Silva, probably. Poor judgement, fierce temper. I’ve known him since he was a boy. The girl too; she may be the only thing he was ever truly denied. I think you’ve deeply underestimated just how angry Cole is over being frustrated in the moment he thought he finally had her. Ventress understood the depths of that feeling and used it as a weapon.”

“You think Silva is responsible?”

“All I have for you is conjecture, based on my understanding of Cole. He’s arrogant enough but I’m not sure he would make the attempt without prompting. Even if he’s responsible, you may want to look elsewhere for the origin of the scheme.”

“Whoever came up with the idea is secondary,” Rufus said. “Finding Asano is the priority.”

“Well, I don’t have him, or know who does. All I can offer is some advice. If you look into Silva, don’t look to Silva himself. Look for what he’s been doing. Even he isn’t fool enough to take your friend without precautions. Find those precautions and you find your friend. Presuming Silva is the one that took him.”

Danielle and Humphrey Geller had come upon Lucian Lamprey as he was reading in the Magic Society library. He was in an open area full of comfortable reading chairs and didn't bother to get up from the one he was occupying. He put his book down on a side table and convivially waved at them to join him.

"You were very easy to find, Mr Lamprey" Danielle said, sitting down. Humphrey remained standing, next to her chair. "To the point of conspicuousness, in fact. One might almost think you were being fastidious about establishing an alibi."

"And exactly what dark deeds would I need an alibi, Lady Geller?"

"Jason Asano has gone missing."

"Oh? I suppose I can see why you would look at me, but I have to imagine I am but a single name on a very long list. He might have made allies out of powerful people like yourself, but he's annoyed even more. Taking opportunities that rightly belonged to Greenstone's nobility. A complete disregard for propriety, decorum and the inherent superiority of the aristocratic class. He's made enemies he's never even met."

"But you're the one who threatened him in public," Danielle said.

"That was just talk. I'd just lost out in court, and you can't deny he has both the ability and intent to get under people's skin. If I genuinely intended to have someone disposed of, then I would make it a point to be friendly, rather than threaten them. Even putting aside the warning, it helps avoid conversations like this one."

Danielle gave him a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"I assume we can count on the full support of the Magic Society in finding him?"

"Naturally," Lamprey said. "I'll hand pick anyone involved in trying to find him and supervise everything personally. Of course, he does have that little issue with tracking, doesn't he? Such a shame."

Danielle stood back up.

"Mr Lamprey, if you did happen across someone involved in this situation – through sheer happenstance, for example – then you would be well served by convincing them to reconsider the whole enterprise."

"Oh, I couldn't agree more," Lamprey said. "With Bahadir and the Remores, it means dealing with gold rankers. That's something only someone as foolish as Asano would do."

Danielle levied a penetrating gaze on Lamprey, then turned to leave, Humphrey following after. Lamprey called out after them and they turned around.

"Do let me know if a body turns up. It will reopen legal proceedings regarding a young lady in dire need of some... strict guidance."

“The Adventure Society won’t let you touch her,” Humphrey said, face creased with anger. “And even if they did, I wouldn’t.”

“The yapping of a dog, hiding under its owner’s skirts,” Lamprey said dismissively. “Have you taken a liking to my thief, little doggy?”

“I’d never let you take her as an indentured servant,” Humphrey said. “I wouldn’t let you take anyone.”

“No?” Lamprey asked. “I didn’t see you in court last year when I claimed my previous one.”

He shook his head sadly.

“Poor girl. So pretty, but she went mysteriously missing, too. Of course, she didn’t have the heroic Geller clan rushing to her rescue. Do you only help poor people when Asano tells you to? I do hope he’s alright or you’ll have to go back to protecting heiresses.”

Danielle placed a hand on Humphrey’s shoulder, silencing the reply he was about to spit out.

“You should be careful, Lamprey,” she said. “Mysterious disappearances seem to be going around.”

“Are you threatening me, Lady Geller?”

Danielle strode back across the room, Lamprey standing up to meet her. The tall, muscular elf towered over the small woman but she radiated threat like a sword. The clash of their auras drew looks from the few library patrons not already surreptitiously watching the confrontation between the Director of the Magic Society and the City’s most famous adventurer. Their auras pushed against one another, Lamprey’s yielding under the flawless, unflinching power and control of Danielle’s.

“Lamprey, if Asano is dead and I find out you’re involved, I’m going to carve you up for chum on the steps of the Adventure Society, for everyone to see, and then use you to go shark fishing. That was me threatening you.”

Belinda made her way down an alley in Old City, stopping in front of an unmarked door and knocking twice. A panel on the door slid across, revealing a pair of eyes that went wide on recognising Belinda.

“Is she in?” Belinda asked.

“You shouldn’t be here,” the woman behind the door said. “There’s all kinds of stories going around about you and Wexler.”

“The reality is crazier than the stories, I promise.”

“Just go, Belinda.”

Belinda projected her aura through the door, suppressing that of the woman behind it.

"I'm going through that door," Belinda said. "It'll go better for both of us if you open it first."

"Let her in," came another voice from inside. It was the rich, deep voice of an older woman. The door opened, the woman behind it watching Belinda warily as she went past. The older woman had a broad, mannish body and curly hair down to her shoulders. She was in her early fifties, but fit and strong.

"Hello, Marg," Belinda greeted.

"Lindy," Marg said warmly. "Please, come up."

She led Belinda up some stairs and onto the flat roof, where picnic furniture had been set up on a rug. Marg waved Belinda to a chair, taking another for herself.

"You know, Lindy, we really have been hearing some strange stories. I even heard you were an adventurer, now."

"Not yet," Belinda said. "Sophie is. I have the essences but put off the field assessment while we went on a monster safari."

"You have essences?"

Belinda shape shifted, becoming a duplicate of Marg.

"Now that's something we could get some use out of," Marg said. "I don't suppose I can talk you into taking a job?"

"Sorry, Marg. It's the straight and narrow for me."

"That's a shame. What brings you here, then?"

"A man has gone missing. Sophie and I are looking into whether one of the Big Three are behind it."

"You think they are?"

"It's possible. He's annoyed them all in one way or another, largely in the process of helping me and Sophie. So, we owe him."

"Jason Asano," Marg said.

"You've heard of him?"

"His name started floating around when he was working at the Broadstreet Clinic. I hear you've been spending some time there yourself."

Belinda blushed.

"Can you find out about Asano for me?" she asked.

"I can ask around," Marg said. "How urgent is this?"

"I really would have gone through your door."

"That door is stronger than it looks."

"I know," Belinda said. "I put it there, remember."

"So you did. Any place I should start?"

"Adris Dorgan is too smart and has too much to lose, so it's unlikely to be him.

Ventress has the least reason to be annoyed at him, almost certainly not enough for this."

"Ventress is dead," Marg said.

"Dead?"

"No one knows how long, but word got out around a week ago. That bodyguard of hers, Darnell stepped in."

"That won't last," Belinda said. "He's not a flexible thinker."

"Focus on Silva, then?" Marg asked.

"If it's one of them, it's almost certainly him," Belinda said. "With Jason's friends, Cole is the only one stupid enough to try something."

"What is Wexler doing, if you're here?"

"We already figured that if it was any of the Big Three, it was Cole," Belinda said.

"Sophie is taking a more direct approach."

Sophie stepped over broken glass and unconscious bodies, looking for someone cognisant enough to interrogate. She followed the closest groan of pain, finding a hefty man slumped behind the bar with a broken bottle sticking out of his side. She easily hoisted him up on top the bar, causing him to yell out as the bottle shifted.

"As I was saying," Sophie said casually, "I want to know what Silva is up to at the moment."

"I haven't even met him," the man groaned. "I answer to a guy who answers to a guy who answers to a guy. No one tells me anything."

"Who does get told?"

"You know what Silva will do to you?"

Sophie gripped the bottle and twisted, eliciting a scream.

"The docklands!" he yelled. "There's a tavern in the docklands called Sailor's Rest."

"I know it," Wexler said. "There's a mist den operating out of the back."

"Silva has been expanding the mist trade in a big way since you got out," the man said. "The guy who runs it is the area boss for all the mist dens on that side of the city, now."

Crystal mist was a drug made from recording crystals, imbuing the contents into a powder that was dissolved into water, vaporised and inhaled. It would create a world inside the mind, based on the recordings.

Crystal mist was illegal, due to its deleterious affect on the brain. Over time, it caused a residue to build up that slowly but inexorably inflicted permanent damage. Even with magic, the damage couldn't be healed until the residue was purged. Since the residue was resistant to most forms of cleansing, that was an expensive, but not impossible prospect.

Cole Silva's father had maintained a small operation, catering to members of the nobility with low tastes. They had the money and connections to discreetly arrange the expensive cleansing required. Cole had massively expanded the operations, knowing there was never a shortage of disenfranchised people looking for an escape.

There was a pile of people in front of the door, so Sophie left by hopping lightly through the window and dropping down a storey to the ground. By the time the third person had gone through it, very little of the glass was left and she landed lightly amongst the shattered remnants of the window. The men she sent through it had staggered off already. She could see one of them helping the other down the street with an injured leg. She turned in the other direction, toward the docklands, and started running.

The ritual chant was long, sounding more like a sermon glorifying the Builder than the incantation for a ritual. As Killian continued, an aura started emitting from the star seed. It was faint but held an echo of vast power, like the light of a star. The metal frame fell away from the sphere as it rose into the air, its aura washing over Jason. His own aura was already suppressed entirely by the collar around his neck.

The tiny fragments that made up the sphere began separating, drifting up to slowly float through the air around Jason. They rose off the sphere like smoke from a fire until the seed was fully disassembled and the fragments floated around him like a cloud. Suddenly their movement stopped, as if they were frozen in time. The star seed's aura surged abruptly and the fragment darted in, burying themselves in Jason's flesh.