

Chapter 471

Don't Say You Weren't Warned

Jason stepped out of the assessment officer's office to find a stern-looking man and woman waiting for him. They each had a rigidly controlled silver-rank aura.

"So," he said. "Are you two generic security or are you part of this anti-Builder unit?"

"We are part of the Builder cult response team. Come with us, please."

"Absolutely," Jason said. "Take me to your leader."

The pair escorted Jason through the vast administration complex, down through multiple basement sublevels that grew increasingly grim and they went. As they went, Jason could feel a large dead zone below them where his senses stopped cold. Even more than the aura-blocking office walls of the assessor, this was a sealed environment.

He was brought down to the same level as the dead zone, which began at a wall with a large metal door. It was thick and heavy, reaching from floor to ceiling and covered in intricate ritual markings. Perhaps Farrah could have made sense of them but they were far beyond Jason's ritual expertise. Looking at the door, he got the sense of a magical bank vault.

There were two guards outside the door. One was standing to the left of it, with the other inside a secure booth to its right. Both of Jason's escorts had to place their hands up against the glass of the booth, where a previously unseen ritual circle lit up with a green glow.

After seeing the glow, the guard in the booth nodded at Jason's escorts. The guard by the door spoke into some kind of communications device and placed a crystal into a slot in the wall beside the door. The guard in the booth did the same on the other side and the cumbersome metal door slowly descended into the floor. Jason's escorts let him into the wide and high corridor of plain brick behind it.

"Not exactly a cheerful work environment," Jason observed. "You should get some potted plants in. Ones that don't need a lot of sun, obviously."

"Introducing outside materials is a potential point of compromise," the female escort told him.

"That sounds like a super fun workplace."

After passing into the corridor, Jason entered the dead zone. His senses extended through the place but now everything outside it had been cut off. His perception was still politely withdrawn but the subterranean complex wasn't especially large, so he could

sense everything within the limited area. There were two gold-rankers and fourteen silver-rankers, including his escorts.

Most notable were nine people with Builder star seeds inside them, each of which had their auras strongly suppressed. They were in poor condition and all separated, suggesting they were probably prisoners. Jason hoped that was the case, rather than the Builder having infiltrated the anti-Builder taskforce.

There were also people in a similarly poor state who were converted. Rather than a star seed, they had been implanted with clockwork core, modifying them into bizarre amalgams of metal and flesh. These weren't the damaged and repurposed clockwork cores of Earth's superheroes, either.

Fully intact cores turned people into something between victim and minion of the Builder. Jason had seen the results when he and his team fought the Builder in the past when the cult had converted their allies amongst the clergy of Purity. This replaced essence powers with less-potent physical transformations but raised their rank, trading long-term growth for immediate power and obedience.

Jason's escorts led him down several corridors of dark grey brick and through multiple steel doors before stopping in a large room. It looked like a dungeon set up as an office, complete with a heavy wooden desk and a man chained to the wall.

There were no chairs on the visitor side of the desk. Instead, there was only a large ritual circle, permanently set into the floor in brass and multicolour crystal. Jason recognised the ritual, realising it was at least one of the means by which they were testing people for Builder connections.

Chained to the wall, the restrained man's body had metal rods jammed into the torso, arms and legs, the rods covered in glowing runes from which small amounts of mist was rising. Jason got the impression of something being drained from the man and he could feel the rods suppressing the star seed inside him.

The other occupant of the room looked up from his desk as Jason and his escorts entered. He was a gold-ranker that looked no older than his early twenties but only the most oblivious person would mistake him for being Jason's age. There was an air about gold rankers that even normal rankers with no true aura senses picked up on, even if they mistook it for some kind of charisma.

"Thank you. Stay by the door please," he told the escorts in a clipped, military voice. They nodded respectfully and closed the thick metal door before taking positions on either side of it. The gold-ranker then went back to going through the paperwork on his desk and scribbling notes in a book. He hadn't so much as looked at Jason.

Jason shrugged his shoulders and moved over to the man chained to the wall, stepping around the ritual circle set into the floor. The prisoner was hanging limply, eyes open but not seeing. He wasn't dead but in some kind of catatonic state.

"Your décor is a bit garish," Jason said. "I was talking about some potted plants with your employees but that's clearly not the ambience you're going for."

"You find it confronting?" the man asked without looking up.

"I've been worse. But you already know that."

Jason tapped one of the rods with his finger.

"The ability to suppress star seeds without them self-detonating was something they were still working on when I was last in the world. It's come along."

"You've seen them detonate before."

"I have. But you know that too."

The man finally looked up, although Jason didn't turn to face him, still looking at the catatonic prisoner.

"Then why don't you tell me something I don't know, Mr Asano?"

"Because I'm not going to start satisfying your curiosity when you haven't even told me your name."

"Most people show gold-rankers more respect."

"When all I've received is suspicion and rudeness? I'm here so you can determine if I'm a Builder puppet. I haven't been proven one yet."

"If you had, Mr Asano, I think you've seen that your treatment would go beyond rudeness. Stand in front of the desk."

Jason turned around.

"You mean walk willingly into your ritual circle, thereby making myself subject to its effects?"

"Yes."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"I didn't say please because I wasn't asking, Mr Asano."

"I'm just saying that if you want me in a soul projection ritual, you might want to use a smaller one."

"You're familiar with soul projection rituals."

"It's not the first time I've been suspected of being on team Builder. I'm getting sick of telling you things you already know. But that's fine. Just don't say you weren't warned."

Jason stepped into the middle of the room.

The gold-ranker raised his hand and chanted a few meaningless syllables. The ritual activated and Jason felt his aura unleash itself, not just at full strength but fed power and amplified by the ritual. The gold ranker's eyes went wide as the air turned thick as syrup and the glow stone in the ceiling dimmed. Murky darkness filled the room and figures began appearing within it.

The figures were floating dark cloaks, speckled with stars. Inside the cloaks were what looked like portals to places filled with sunshine and blue sky. Around the cloaks were other things, blacker than night. They darted about, quick, and sinister.

The two guards by the door had pressed themselves into the corners of the room, their faces stricken with fear. The man chained to the wall roused from his stupor, eyes clearing as he started thrashing in his chains and screaming a word over and over.

"REJECTOR! REJECTOR! REJECTOR!"

The gold-ranker cancelled the ritual and Jason drew his aura back in as he casually adjusted his floral shirt. The prisoner continued screaming until the gold ranker marched over, grabbed his face and slammed it into the wall, knocking him unconscious. The gold-ranker then went to the closest guard, huddled in the corner. He yanked her to her feet and then did the same for the other.

The door burst open, revealing a gold-rank woman.

"Keel," the newcomer said. "What are you doing in here? Whatever that illusion was, it sent the prisoners berserk. The ones with cores all had seizures and the ones with seeds woke up and won't stop screaming."

The original gold-ranker, Keel, turned to Jason who had a plate in one hand and a fork in the other.

"What?" Jason asked. "I just remembered I had leftover strudel."

Jason was taken into a small, secure room with metal benches set into the stonewalls. Inside, Farrah was already sitting down.

"Sure thing, Farrah," she said to Jason. "I'm going to lay low and not make a fuss. Nice and quiet, that'll be me."

"I told the guy to use a less powerful projection ritual," Jason said. "Have you found these people to be great listeners?"

"The lady I saw was nice," she said. "Is that strudel?"

"I just remembered that I had some leftover. Splitsies?"

"Definitely."

Jason sat down next to her and produced another fork. She grabbed it and he held the plate between them so she could dig in.

“They thought you might be a Builder puppet too?” Jason asked as she groaned happily around a forkful of fruit pastry. She nodded.

“I wonder how long this is going to take?” he wondered. “They’ll probably just leave us sitting here for a while and watch us.”

Farrah threw Jason a curious glance and Jason pointed at a brick in the wall that looked like any other.

The two gold-rankers, Keel and Liara, were watching Jason and Farrah through a seeing stone as Jason pointed it out.

“That man is trouble,” Keel said.

“Yes, but I don’t think he’s a servant of the Builder. Just the opposite, if anything. You felt that aura, just like I did. Its very nature rejected the star seeds and the clockwork cores. You were right about Asano. Whatever he’s been through did something to him. Something that we can use.”

“Perhaps. He’s still only silver-rank and won’t be able to help against the larger threats.”

“I’ll take something that works against the medium threats,” Liara said. “And what was with that aura? Is he another fourfold?”

“No,” Keel said. “His aura is just that strong.”

“How? That strength was practically gold-rank. I’m not sure I even tracked everything floating around in it before you shut the ritual down. That was the touch of gods in there, right?”

“His contact with gods was in his record. It’s nothing we didn’t know. What about the woman?”

“Her aura is outworlder now, instead of human, but clean. She doesn’t have a personal crest, though, so we’ll need to do some more identity verification. We did get something on the power screen ritual. We found traces from a Builder blessing but it wasn’t like the ones we’ve seen from cultists. This was custom. The thing is, though, every racial gift she has was evolved through a blessing.”

“The Builder shouldn’t be able to bestow more than one blessing.”

“It didn’t. Each of those was from a different great astral being. They’re relatively common from the Reaper and the Celestial Book but the World-Phoenix, not so much. As for the Legion and the All-Devouring Eye? The last I heard, they didn’t hand out blessings.”

“Check that with the Magic Society.”

“Oh, I intend to. But whatever is going on with her, I don’t think she’s in the Builder’s camp. The other beings wouldn’t bless her like that if she was.”

“The Builder only blesses its own people.”

“Keel, I think we can safely say that Miss Hurin falls outside of normal circumstances. And she didn’t lie. Did Asano?”

“I don’t know. Couldn’t read his aura until it was projected and I didn’t stop to question him once it was.”

“Did you power screen Asano before the soul projection?”

“No. We know he has a Reaper blessing but after what his aura did to the prisoners I’m not going to bother. I’m convinced he’s clean. As you said, exactly the opposite of in the Builder’s camp.”

“Which means she probably is as well,” Liara said. “We should hold her until we’ve confirmed her identity, at least. I have more records coming from the Magic Society so it shouldn’t take long.”

“Agreed. That leaves the question of what to do with him.”

“I say we stick with your original intentions and make use of him. Both of them.”

“He won’t make for a reliable asset and we don’t know what the Builder is up to yet.”

“Let me run Asano,” Liara said. “We can leave him be for now. Eloise assigned him to solitary delivery missions, as directed. That will let him build up a network of local portal destinations and give any Builder cultists a chance to take a poke. The worst that can happen is we flush some of them out. Once we have a use for him, we step back in.”

“What was Eloise’s assessment?” Keel asked.

“He handled provocation well, but he was aware of what she was doing. He showed anger when she pushed but she thinks it was a show. With that aura of his, she couldn’t read him properly. He’s smart enough but he has impulse-control issues and trouble keeping his mouth closed. He has some connections but nothing local, as far as we can tell.”

“As far as you can tell?” Keel asked.

“The name, Jason Asano. I feel like I’ve heard it before but I can’t remember when.”

“You have the memory of a gold-ranker,” Keel said. “If you can’t remember, you’re either imagining it or it was of incidental importance.”

“I don’t know,” Liara said. “It’s been bothering me.”

“Go through his records if you like,” Keel said. “I’ll hand him over to you entirely. I have this feeling that I’d end up killing him.”