

Chapter 214

Putting the Band Back Together

In the wake of Cole Silva's arrest, his organisation fell into chaos as Silva's cousins fought to seize control. At first it was restricted to carefully feeling out key people and quietly garnering loyalty. As days passed into weeks without a definitive leader rising up, it started causing trouble with street level operations and the conflict became bloodier.

In the midst of all this, Killian's trail was finally found, but far too late. It was eventually discovered that he had decamped the city entirely, taking a ship loaded with a good chunk of Cole Silva's ill-gotten holdings. Until the crew of that boat turned up somewhere, it was a dead end.

Jason felt that he turned a corner in his recovery with the resummoning of his familiars. He began with Gordon and then Shade, grateful to discover that they were the same familiars he had previously. While the bodies of the familiars would be the same with each summoning, the astral spirits inhabiting them could be different, if the original spirits did not want to re-enter his service.

"Your soul is rather changed," Shade observed. "You have been through an ordeal in the time I've been gone."

"It's been rough," Jason acknowledged. "Glad to have you back, mate."

"I am also glad to return," Shade said. "The Reaper's realm is a rather monotonous place. I did take the time to make enquires while I was there, however, under the assumption that you survived to resummon me. I am now more confident about accessing the Order of the Reaper's astral space."

Resummoning Colin was another thing entirely. Summoning his new bronze-rank vessel would require a bronze-rank ritual. Part of his recovery time had been spent continuing his study of magical theory and he had the instinctive understanding of his power to guide him. Despite this, he wasn't entirely confident about handling the increased sophistication and power the higher-rank ritual would require. He discussed the issue with Clive, who had a suggestion.

"You have that bronze-rank skill book, right? The one you took from Landemere Vane?"

Jason did, indeed, still have skill books detailing bronze-rank ritual and astral magic.

"They require bronze rank to use, though," Jason said.

“So, fake it,” Clive said. “Use a spirit coin before you use the skill book. It’ll be a strain, but nothing you can’t handle after what you’ve been through.”

Jason took Clive’s advice. Taking a seat in his cloud house, he consumed a bronze-rank spirit coin under Clive’s supervision, with Neil on hand in case it became too much. Unlike his previous uses, his enhanced awareness of his own soul let him sense exactly what the coin was doing to him. It flushed through his soul harmlessly, merging with his own power before flooding into his body. He gained a better understanding of the cost of using spirit coins as he could clearly feel the power was more than his body could contain. He would only be able to briefly use the power surge before his body blew a fuse and shut off.

Hurriedly, he used the skill book. As with the previous one he had used, the text floated out of the book, becoming a magical cloud hovering around him. The power of the coin faded, leaving him feebly slumped in the chair, but the it had done it’s work. Without reaching a false bronze-rank state, he wouldn’t have been able to trigger the book at all.

When the cloud of magical text started injecting itself into Jason’s body, something started going horribly wrong. Jason had experienced skill book use before and this was less strenuous than the huge tome that had contained his martial art. At the time he used that skill book, though, he hadn’t experienced the star seed implantation.

It started with a familiar feeling as his body was invaded. The skill book’s magic was entering his mind, not his soul but it was close enough that it awakened buried flashes of memory. Suddenly he was back in that room, hanging from the ceiling, vulnerable and helpless as his body and mind were invaded.

Clive and Neil watched in horror as Jason tumbled out of the chair and onto his knees, clutching at his head and screaming. Neil started to cast a healing spell but Clive stopped him.

“Don’t,” Clive warned urgently. “Muddling the magic going into him right now could do some real damage.”

“What do we do?” Neil asked.

“All we can do is let him go through it,” Clive said unhappily.

Eventually the screaming stopped and Jason was laying on the floor, looking up with blank eyes.

“He’s not breathing,” Clive said.

“He’s been training,” Neil said. “I’ve been helping him with it. He doesn’t breath at all, now.”

After the problem with the skill book, Jason didn't move on to resummoning Colin right away. He continued to work with Arabelle, Carlos having departed the city. He was important to the star seed implantation recovery efforts and couldn't be spared for more than a couple of weeks on one person. He helped Jason through the worst and Jason did everything he could to give Carlos information he could use to help others, the only reason The Adventure Society and his church had let him stay as long as he did.

Having his other familiars back helped. Their presence in his soul was a comfort, a support when he awoke from a nightmare or suffered another flashback.

He concentrated on other tasks. More training, but also more mundane affairs. One of them was his new beard. It was trimmed light, with a line next to the chin where a thin scar was. Another bisected his left eyebrow.

"I'm still not sure about the beard," he said at breakfast.

"I like it," Neil said. "It covers your face."

"No, it's really good," Belinda said. She was the one who suggested he keep it in the first place.

"It doesn't make me look like a villain?"

"Isn't seeming like a villain kind of your thing?" Gary asked.

"Stop discouraging him," Belinda said. "It looks good, doesn't it, Soph?"

Sophie looked up from her sausage and eggs to give Jason an intense stare. Finally she nodded.

"Your face is too pointy," she said. "It softens the edges."

"I'd have said that it flatteringly frames your facial structure," Belinda said, "but I'd take it. For Sophie, that was a gushing compliment."

Eventually Jason decided it was time to resummon Colin. After using the skill book he had delved into the theory to consolidate his knowledge. Now he was as ready as he was going to be. After the skill book, his whole team was going to be present for support, along with Rufus and Gary.

For each earlier familiar re-summoning, he had hired out a ritual room in the Magic Society, rather than do it on the houseboat. The cloud floor of the houseboat was not ideal for drawing out ritual circles, lacking the dedicated, hard-floored ritual rooms of Emir's cloud palace.

Jason did so again for Colin's ritual, Clive helping him pick out the one with the facilities to hose the room down afterward. He began preparations by stripping down to his

underwear. No one mentioned the scars speckling his body, or the one long scar across his torso.

“Is that really necessary?” Neil asked. “No one wants to see your skinny body.”

“This will be messy, if the last time is anything to go by,” Jason said.

“It really was,” Gary agreed. “We never actually cleaned that room after, we just picked up his unconscious body and snuck off.”

“There’s no point ruining good clothes,” Jason said. “Sorry we can’t all be super buff like you, Neil. Which reminds me, we need to take you to get some more flattering clothes. Seriously, who makes that stuff?”

“My aunt is quite interested in fashion design.”

“Oh, I get it now,” Jason said. “Is she too influential to tell how bad her work is, or are you all just being nice.”

“She controls a fairly good portion of the family’s holdings, yes,” Neil acknowledged.

“Fair enough, then. Just tell her that your team leader made you get a new wardrobe to fit in with the group.”

“Since when are you the team leader?” Neil asked.

“Of course I’m the team leader,” Jason said. “I have the best hair.”

“Sophie has the best hair,” Neil said.

“I’m the most handsome?”

“Not even top three,” Neil said.

“There’s only four guys in the team,” Jason said dejectedly.

“Maybe you should start the ritual now?” Clive suggested.

Jason nodded and started setting out the circle and the materials, mostly bronze-rank blood quintessence gems. Jason took a razor from his inventory and sliced the back of his hand, letting Colin spill out onto the ground. The leech pile spread out around the diagram, seeming to have an instinctive understanding of where to go.

“Alright, little mate,” Jason told Colin. “See you again soon.”

Jason began the ritual. Lines of red life force drifted out of the leeches and fed into Jason, the leeches withering into nothing. Even with that extra life force, the ritual took a heavy toll on Jason. At the edge of his vision, his mana and stamina bars emptied rapidly as mental and physical exhaustion overtook him. The little body shape indicating damage went from green to red all over as blood started seeping from his pores, spilling down his body to flow into the middle of the circle where it vanished.

Once again, Jason's mind tried to drag him back to his torture, the memory of his body being ravaged by the star seed. He willed himself to stay in the moment. He felt his other familiars residing inside him. He glanced up at his friends, looking on with concern.

He dropped to one knee, struggling to stay conscious. Half as much blood loss would have killed a normal person. It all flowed into the circle and vanished, until all that Jason had put in and more started spilling from the floor like a wellspring, inundating the ritual circle, only to stop when it reached the edge.

Crawling up out of the pool came a leech, no different to Colin's previous form. It had the same slick, wormy body and gaping maw with circular rings of oversized lamprey teeth. It was joined by a second, then a third, more and more emerged until they were being pushed out like meat from a grinder.

Strips of bloody cloth emerged from the mass, gathering the leeches together and wrapping them up. Like compression bandages, they pushed the leeches together into shape, slowly binding them up into a humanoid form.

The sanguine horror Jason, Gary, Rufus and Farrah had fought had taken on the appearance of a mummy. While the basic form Colin has taken was similar it was not identical. Along with bundling the leeches into shape, the strips of cloth had formed a ragged cloak and hood, draping off the humanoid figure.

"I think it's trying to look like you, Jason," Humphrey said.

Jason didn't hear him, kneeling on the floor. His body was ravaged and he was desperately trying to keep his mind from going back to the torture room.

Once the figure finished forming, the bloody strips dried, leaving them a rusty colour. It reached out to help Jason to his feet and he grasped the crude, fingerless hand.

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- Colin (sanguine horror).
 - Familiar (bronze rank).

 - Swarm. Hive mind.
 - Bites from the leech swarm inflict [Bleeding], [Leech Toxin] and [Necrotoxin].
 - Leech attacks drain health and stamina, allowing the rapid replacement of destroyed biomass.
 - Ranged entangling attacks can be made using cloth strips. Grips inflict minimal constriction damage but periodically inflict [Leech Toxin] and [Necrotoxin] if an area with an open wound is grabbed or the target is suffering the [Bleeding] condition.
 - While subsumed within the summoner, the summoner has accelerated healing and stamina recovery. Healing and recovery rate is determined by how much biomass was absorbed and increases with the summoner's level of injury.
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In addition to the changes to Colin's form, the healing he provided would now increase the more Jason was injured, the value of which was obvious. Jason had Colin walk around a little, which the familiar did, hesitantly at first and then with increasing confidence. Its new pseudo-human guise was faster than the leech pile of its previous form, although it still couldn't move much faster than a hurried shuffle.

"Alright Colin," Jason said wearily. "Time to come home."

Through his instinctive sense of the familiar ability, Jason could sense that he would no longer need to cut himself for Colin to enter or leave his body. He reached out a hand, Colin doing the same and the familiar was absorbed directly in through the skin. It happened in a comical rush, like a cartoon character being sucked into a vacuum cleaner. Jason immediately felt Colin go to work healing him heal and recover. He looked down at his bloodied body and pulled out a bottle of crystal wash.