

Chapter 667

A Mortal Perspective

From his room overlooking the camp, Jason watched a combination of Adventure Society enforcers and Magic Society functionaries take away five cylinders on a floating platform. Each cylinder was a stasis pod, containing a worm host that could be vaguely made out through the blue liquid in the pod.

Someone appeared in the room and joined Jason in staring out the window. It wore brown robes and sported a neat grey beard, appearing as a handsomely middle-aged man. Jason knew that it was neither middle-aged nor a man, and didn't react to its arrival. It was only able to appear there because Jason had withdrawn his spirit domain from the bulk of his cloud construct.

"Just because I happen to have left the door open," Jason said, "that doesn't mean I want just anyone wandering in."

"Thank you for giving my people access to these facilities. It has given us the most precious resource when it comes to healing: time."

"You don't need to thank me for basic decency. If you can help, you help. That's obvious. Besides, I'd rather knock up a quickie hospital and help people than carve up people I was too late to save."

"You've had a grim day."

"Lots of people have, but that's adventuring. We meet a lot of people on the worst days of their lives and hope to make them a little less awful. Didn't do so well today."

"Not every adventurer sees their role in that light."

"Enough do. I know a lot of us get changed by the money, the power, the influence. I certainly was; just ask your boy Dominion. But when the time to step up comes, most adventurers put all that aside. Is there a lot of ambition wrapped up in that? Sure. But they answer the call; the monster surge proved that. There's a lot of hope to be found there."

Healer smiled.

"I am glad that you can find optimism on such days as these. I wondered if there was any left in you when you first came back to this world."

"Is that what you're here for? To cheer me up? I don't think providing a few amenities for the camp here warrants the personal thank you."

"You are in a strange position, Jason. May I call you Jason?"

"Since when does your lot ask permission for anything?"

His laughter was warm and comforting, like a roaring fire in a snow chalet.

"I suppose we don't. Not with mortals, but you don't fall neatly into that box. You are certainly and most enthusiastically mortal, yet you have a foot firmly planted in our realm."

He glanced sideways at Jason.

"Thank you for opening your space to my people. Domains are tricky things, and I can easily see how you might be reluctant to withdraw it."

"Making your people come in and deal with the presence of a spirit domain would only cause problems. It would promote distrust and soak up valuable time while I convince your people to use the building. Seems obvious to take a step back."

"Even so, it is not easy to forsake control, even for a short while. *My boy Dominion* does not approve."

"I don't approve of him either, so fair enough. If you really are grateful, though, I don't suppose you'd be open to a few questions?"

"I can give you *some* answers, but the areas I can speak on are limited by my role. I am not Knowledge. Also, will you trust anything a god has to say?"

"You may not be a bloke, and you may not have a heart, but you seem like a bloke with his heart in the right place. And as for a topic, surely a god can talk about god stuff."

"Yes, but my advice is to concentrate on mortal affairs. The rest will come to you naturally as the incongruity in power between your aspects of self grow smaller."

"Oh, I'd be more than happy to wait until I naturally get to cosmic affairs, but you may have noticed that they're not waiting for me. I've got a great astral being with a personal grudge. I've got gods paying way too close attention – no offence - and I had to start re-writing reality to save the world. Twice. And I cannot understate the degree to which I do not know what I'm doing with that, and I've still got a dimensional bridge to finish. For which I need to go poking around a messenger invasion, which is pretty tame by comparison. And yeah, the messengers aren't mine to deal with, but then there's the whole bit about me being an astral king. Even if I'm willing to put that aside, I don't think they will."

"Then use it; they will respect that status. It won't stop them from trying to kill you, but there can be advantages to being a respected enemy."

"What happened to focusing on mortal affairs?"

"The messengers are mortal. More or less. But I cannot give you more advice on that than I have. I don't want War complaining to me about encroachment."

"How does that work, exactly? What happened with Purity? Why didn't your lot tell anyone?"

“It is not for the rest of us to reveal the deceptions of the god Deception, or unveil the disguises of the God disguise.”

“Tell that to generations of people who were worshipping the wrong god.”

“We did. To gods, the limitations of mortals seem strange. They seem like nothing to us, often meaningless or even contradictory. We, in turn, have limitations that make no sense to mortals, yet to us are as binding as the inevitability of death is to them.”

“You might be talking to the wrong guy about the inevitability of death.”

“As I said, Jason, you are in a strange position. Your nature is liminal, which makes it hard to know how to deal with you.”

“Isn’t there a god of Truth who could have told everyone about Purity?”

“It is far from that simple. Fire and water may seem like oppositional forces at a glance, but in reality, their interactions are complex and not always obvious. In the same way, Truth and deception are not simple antagonists. And even if they were, would you, of all people want them playing out their conflict in the mortal realm?”

“Isn’t that exactly what Disguise did by taking over the Purity church? That’s a lot of mortals being played with like pieces in a game.”

“And if gods were constantly making proxy war of the physical realm, then all mortals would be but pawns, moving back and forth. We gods choose our moments and take our turns, by our own measure.”

“And Truth didn’t get a go in however long since the rest of you ganked Purity?”

“We did nothing to Purity. Most mortals believe that we did, but no. He sanctioned himself.”

“And what is sanctioning, exactly? I’ve been wondering about this for a while.”

“Sanctioning is an extreme change in the nature of a transcendent being, through a comprehensive shift in their authority.”

“Just to be clear, when you say ‘authority,’ you’re talking about the power to fundamentally reconfigure reality and unreality both, creating or recreating elements of cosmos, be it part of a physical universe or the deep astral, right? Or is it more of a ‘permit to host a charity sausage sizzle’ kind of authority?”

“The first one.”

“I figured, but thought it was worth making sure. I’d feel like an idiot if I got it in my head that the old Builder was banished to the depths of the astral when he was outside a hardware store, fundraising for the local girl’s cricket team.”

Healer turned to look at Jason, who looked back.

“What?” Jason asked.

"You are an odd person."

"I'm not that odd. You just need to talk to more mortals."

"That is not so easy. The direct attention of a deity can be hard to withstand. We once gave you that attention, to harden your soul for the challenges to come. There is a reason our appearances in the worship squares are brief and focused on crowds. Unless a mortal is within my spirit domain, or part of my clergy and inured to my attention, even speaking to a projection like this for too long is harmful."

"Should I be worried? We've been here for a while. I feel fine, but are you pulling a spiritual silent-but-deadly on me?"

"As I have said before, you are unusual. Not many mortals have a nascent universe inside them."

"Mum always told me I was special. That's not true. She said my brother was special. Hey, did you change the subject? We were talking about sanctioning, and suddenly you're bringing up my mum."

Healer raised an eyebrow but Jason shamelessly ignored him.

"You were saying something about sanctioning being a shift in authority."

"Yes. A transcendent entity is, by nature, either largely or entirely comprised of authority. Very little of that authority is boundless, however, and most of it has specific affinities. This is how gods come to have areas of influence."

"So, you're pretty much a sentient bundle of authority with a healing affinity?"

"Putting it that way is rather rude, but yes. To the degree that a mortal mind can comprehend the nuances, that is somewhat accurate."

"And sanctioning is changing the affinity of someone's authority?"

"Yes. As the name 'sanctioning' implies, this is normally a punitive act, imposed by other transcendent entities. You know of the new Builder. The previous Builder had its authority forcibly transmuted until it could no longer serve as the Builder."

"So, the old Builder is out there somewhere."

"Yes, although I shall speak no further on that. It is not for me to tell or for you to hear. Yet. The higher-order secrets will come to you as you progress as an astral king."

"And you said that you and the other gods *didn't* do that to Purity?"

"No. Gods can alter their own nature, but it is hard to do so without encroaching on other gods. Purity did it by not changing the affinity of his authority but by expending it."

"He used up all his power?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I do not know his reasons. As a god, I am content, but I know that others are unsatisfied with their lot. Purity took all his power, transmuted all that he was, and channelled it into an act of creation."

"Creation? You're saying that the god of Purity made something so hardcore he had to top himself to get it done?"

"Yes."

"What could possibly require a god killing themselves to make?"

"Something that would inspire the messengers to invade a world."

Jason's eyes went wide.

"Someone told me that the messengers were here looking for something. Something that can purge the monster core effects out of someone's soul. You're telling me that it's some kind of artefact that a god killed himself to make?"

"That's not strictly accurate, but is broadly correct, yes."

"So, to sum up, the god of Purity got ennui and committed suicide by MacGuffin."

"That is not how I would describe it, but I can see how that could be seen as the case. From a very specific perspective."

"You know, I was wondering if my friend was overstating what a big deal this monster core purification thing is."

"He was not."

"Yeah, I'm getting that."

"Into whose hands this object falls is important, yes."

"Are you asking me to go look for the thing? Is that why you're here?"

"No. You have no place amongst the forces that will clash over this."

"Diamond rankers."

"Yes. You can participate in the search, should you desire, but once it is found, run far and fast. I would advise staying out of the chase altogether."

"Do you know where this divine relic is?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to tell anyone?"

"No. After reluctantly going along with Deception and Disguise, the gods have unilaterally decreed that none of us shall interfere with the search for the artefact Purity left behind, or the fight that takes place over it. We shall leave its fate to mortals to determine for themselves."

"Even though it's some kind of divine relic?"

“If a new Purity rises, they may intervene. It is unlikely one will before the issue is settled, however.”

“If you’re not here to get me to involve myself, why are you here?”

“To express my gratitude, as I said. I also have something for you. Consider it both a thank you for your accommodations to my people today, as well as a welcoming gift for your first step into the immortal realm, as tentative as that step is.”

He held out a fist-sized orb, clear but filled with sparks of blue, silver and gold. The moment Jason took it, the god was gone.

Item: [Genesis Command: Life] (transcendent rank, legendary)

The authority to create a life. (consumable, magic core).

- Effect: Give true life to an astral construct created from a dimensional space. The construct becomes a true astral entity, bound to the dimensional space.
- Uses remaining: 1/1

“Holy, crap guy,” Jason muttered. “I think you’re overpaying just to rent out some space.”