

Chapter 585

Dodging the Topic

"The fact that the Builder's forces effectively abandoned the Storm Kingdom as a battlefield weeks ago has lessened the local pandemonium," Dawn said.

"Things are a little more hectic elsewhere," Humphrey added. "The Builder's forces staging a complete and immediate withdrawal is causing confusion and havoc elsewhere. Welcome confusion, but people don't know what's going on or why."

"The Adventure Society is sending out messages as fast as they can open water links, trying to keep some semblance of order."

"Which is agitating the Magic Society," Farrah added.

While Jason had been sleeping off his latest self-destructive escapade, his friends had been out getting the lay of the land after events earlier in the week. Dawn took the royal family, going straight to the top with Soramir. Rufus took the Adventure Society, being the only three-star adventurer in the group. That gave him access to more information than the others could get.

Farrah was a member of the Magic Society, so she took that avenue. She was only an associate member, unlike Clive, who had been a mid-level official. Clive had quite firmly cut his ties with the society, however, despite several attempts on their parts to make amends, making Farrah the best option. Humphrey had gone to the local branch of the Geller family, which was a good way to get a feel for what the influential of Rimaros were up to.

"It's no surprise that you are the object of a great deal of attention right now," Humphrey told Jason. "Not with how they've been watching this place since the light-show you and your familiars put on when we were trying to keep you alive."

"Not to mention the impossible portal you opened that put you in that position," Farrah added. "The Magic Society is *very* interested in hearing more about that."

"Maybe you could visit one city without projecting a huge display of your personal crest over it," Rufus suggested.

"Actually, I've visited two without doing that," Jason said.

"The point is," Humphrey said, "that you've been under close observation ever since. Your encounter with the great astral beings is common knowledge, at least in the circles of people who know things that most don't."

"Meaning rich pricks with an agenda," Jason said.

"You're a rich prick with an agenda," Farrah pointed out.

“My agenda is primarily sandwich-related. It doesn’t count.”

“A god showing up for a chat afterwards did not help calm things down,” Rufus pointed out.

“Thus the avalanche of contacts and invitations,” Jason said. “Everyone wants a pound of flesh, whether it's owed them or not. No surprises there.”

“These initial attempts to reach out are just precursors,” Rufus said. “These groups will all have looked into you by now and have a good idea of how you’ve operated in the past. Right now they’re testing the waters, hoping to get lucky and have you do something unexpected and rash they can take advantage of.”

“I’ve gotten at least a little better at not doing that,” Jason said grimly. “There were a lot of eyes on me on Earth.”

“You still had a penchant for the big, dramatic move,” Farrah said.

“But I’m past the days of randomly making trouble to see what I can stir up.”

“You stole a nuclear weapon.”

“Not for laughs. Now, when I make trouble, it’s deliberate because I know what I’m trying to stir up.”

“What’s a nuclear weapon?” Humphrey asked.

“A city killer,” Jason said. “It’s the thing Travis made to take down the Builder city.”

“Oh, the super explosion box.”

“That’s what people are calling it?” Jason asked.

“I think we’ve gotten a little off track,” Dawn said.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “What were we talking about? I remember mentioning sandwiches.”

“We were talking about the fact that every powerful organisation in the city, and quite a few beyond, is interested in what they can get out of you. They’re only taking tentative steps right now, but none of them really expect that to get them anything. They’re waiting out the aftermath of the Builder’s departure, but I can promise you that they’re looking for pressure points as we speak. Sooner or later, they’re going to come at you hard.”

“But politically, right? There’s no way they make a hard play with this many eyes on me.”

“No,” Rufus said. “No one wants to face the wrath of Soramir Rimaros or Dawn here, let alone risk interfering with some agenda of Dominion’s they don’t know about. They’ll be looking for leverage on you, Jason. You’re the weak link because no one cares if you get angry, so long as the people around you don’t.”

"Yeah, I've seen that pattern before," Farrah said. "I imagine they'll have to learn why that's a mistake the hard way."

"The organisations we're talking about aren't fools," Rufus said. "They know that the kind of rewards they're looking for only come from fishing in dangerous waters. They won't push too hard unless they're extremely certain of themselves. Jason, your situation is likely to be annoying, but mostly not dangerous. No one is going to grab you off the street."

"And not every organisation is lacking in decency," Humphrey added.

"I know your family are good people," Jason said. "Unfortunately, there's no shortage of less-good people."

"The best solution is to get out of the Storm Kingdom," Rufus said. "The longer you stay holed up in your pagoda, the worse it's going to get. The Adventure Society was already unhappy about you continuing to hold Melody. Now a lot of very powerful people are looking for answers. Warily, but eagerly."

"They don't care about answers," Jason said. "They care about power. They see the crowd I'm running with and think I've got something special. They want to know what it is and if they can get in on it or take it for themselves."

"Yes," Dawn agreed. "But the forces that have led you to your current position are barely appropriate for you, and arguably aren't at all. They have no place trying to lay claim to any of it."

"Yeah," Farrah said. "Because powerful people are famous for deciding that they have enough power and not trying to get more. You can tell them it'll only bring trouble all day long, but it'll only convince them that it's even more valuable than they thought."

"The question is, what do we do now?" Jason asked. "I'm inclined to wait, at least for the moment. I know that gives pressure time to escalate, but I'm not ready to move yet. Being on the road is a less-secure position than what we have now. What I need is time to heal, and these groups aren't the only ones waiting for things to settle in the Builder's absence. For now, I'd like to let other people make their moves so we can get a sense of what they're after and how hard they're willing to push for it."

"That's not sustainable," Rufus said, "but I think it's the right move in the short term. Rather than sticking your neck out, let them do it and see what we can learn."

"The Adventure Society won't just allow one of their members to be tossed around by powerful people like a ball," Humphrey said. "They'll want some insight as to what's going on, but give it to them and I think you'll find they shield you from most interested parties."

"He's right," Rufus agreed. "That's the covenant: adventurers protect people and the Adventure Society protects adventurers."

“Yeah, but not every kind of protection is something I’m looking for,” Jason pointed out. “Throwing me in a nice, secure room keeps me safe, and hey, since I’m there, why not ask me some questions?”

“The branch here isn’t like in Greenstone,” Rufus assured him. “Rimaros is one of the most prominent adventuring cities in the world. Nothing they can get from you is worth compromising their reputation.”

“Nothing?” Jason asked.

“Nothing,” Rufus said. “Even if they could get some of the universe power you gave back to the Builder, without the great astral beings going after them, still not worth it.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “That’s the loose plan, then. We wait it out, I heal up—”

“Without finding some new and ridiculously destructive magic to shove inside yourself,” Farrah said pointedly.

“Yes,” Jason said. “Without blowing myself up again. We see what people throw at us and react accordingly.”

“What’s your schedule for departure?” Rufus asked. “Moving too soon might expose you to the machinations of the people watching you, but moving too late gives them too much time to bring their resources to bear.”

“End of the monster surge,” Jason said. “Then we scarper. There will be a lot of adventurers on the move, so we’ll stand out less.”

“Our intention is to stay on the move for a time,” Humphrey told Rufus. “We’ll make our way to Cyrion where the other people from Earth arrived, but we won’t rush it.”

“Lay low, as much as we can,” Jason added. “Assuming an island doesn’t come to life and decide I need to make in some sneakers or whatever weird crap comes at me next.”

“That seems unlikely,” Rufus said. “What are sneakers?”

“A kind of shoe.”

“Why would a sentient island want you to make shoes.”

“I know right?” Jason asked. “It’s always something.”

Jason made one exception to the policy of not engaging with outside groups and extended an invitation for someone to visit the pagoda. He was waiting for their arrival in a sitting room that, like many of the pagoda’s rooms, opened out onto a balcony to take full advantage of the views. That was a design feature that Jason had borrowed from Emir, whose cloud palace usually took the form of five towers with many terraced rooms.

Dawn was keeping him company and they sat side-by-side in front of a very full table.

“No, you already used the bottom action on your other card,” Jason explained. “That means you have to use the top action on this card.”

“But I want to use the bottom action.”

“Well, you can’t.”

“Why not?”

“The rules.”

“Since when do you care about rules?”

“I care about rules when it matters,” Jason said. “This isn’t some king or great astral being nonsense that isn’t important. This is a board game.”

“These rules don’t make sense. Why can I only use my axe one time? That’s not how axes work.”

“You can use it again after you take a long rest.”

“How heavy is this axe?”

“It’s probably a magic axe. It might need to recharge.”

“That is terrible axe design.”

“Gary said the same thing,” Jason said unhappily.

Dawn shook her head.

“You know we still need to talk about the astral throne and astral gate,” she told him.

“We’re in the middle of a game.”

“Jason...”

“Not yet. They’re in my soul space. Until I can open the door to it without passing out, I can’t examine them properly. There’s no point discussing it until I can take a better look.”

“That’s what you’re calling your spirit realm, now? Soul space?”

“I keep having to explain spirit realms and spirit domains and I always ending up answering questions about which one is which, and what’s the difference, can I use them to smuggle amphorae—”

“What?”

“Amphorae. It’s the plural of amphora.”

“I know what amphorae are.”

“Then why did you ask? I’m very confused.”

“You’re dodging the topic. Again.”

“Of course I am. It feels like you’re going to tell me off.”

“I *am* going to tell you off.”

"It's not my fault I have vast cosmic power. Your boss and her friends keep leaving it lying about. You don't put a gun out where an irresponsible child could get their hands on it."

"The irresponsible child being you."

"Do I at least get points for self-awareness?"

"No."

"Mr Asano," Shade said, emerging from a shadow. "Priest Quilido will be arriving shortly."

"Good," Dawn said gratefully. "Shade, can you please pack up the game?"

"We're in the middle of a scenario," Jason complained.

Carlos was nervous about approaching the pagoda that now towered over the cliff. He arrived at the island on the back of a flying manta, driven by a trained rider. The building stood out from very far off when approaching through the air.

The last time Carlos had spoken to Jason, Carlos had pushed him about participating in the future conflict against the messengers. It was more than he should have, and Carlos still felt shame as a healer that he had allowed his own agenda to compromise his care for a patient.

Jason had gotten angry over another powerful person attempting to dictate to him. Given what had taken place since they last saw one another, Carlos had a much better idea of what Jason was talking about. Carlos had first met Jason after the Builder attempted to lay claim to Jason's soul. He never imagined that the Builder and the iron ranker would continue to interact.

The manta flew over the pagoda and Carlos dropped off, the rider turning back in the direction of Livaros. Carlos landed lightly, despite falling from twice the height of the building, and walked up to the entrance. He was met by Jason's shadow familiar.

"Priest Quilido. I know you are here at Mr Asano's invitation, but I hope you can act with a little more decorum than was demonstrated on your last visit. He is, as he was then, recovering from having channelled energies that he should not."

"Again?"

"Yes."

"What happened this time?"

"That is best left for Mr Asano to explain. Follow me, please."

Shade led Carlos through large double doors that opened at their approach, into a large atrium. Multiple mezzanine levels rose up into the tower and a waterfall spilled off the

lowest one, feeding into a pool. The walls were dark, smoky crystal, but the insides of the crystal swirled with nebulous patterns that were the kaleidoscopic light source for the room.

Plants grew all over, dangling from the mezzanine levels, set into walls and free-standing in pots. They were leafy, tropic varieties with flowers that seemed to shift in colour under the strange light. The pool was in a recessed floor space, surrounded by a garden that had a ringed path and some benches.

“This is very different to the last design,” he observed out loud.

“This design is what Mr Asano uses in his claimed territories,” Shade explained as he led Carlos to the side of the room.

“What does claimed territories mean exactly?”

“What does this place feel like, Priest Quilido?”

“Like a temple to a god that doesn’t exist.”

“That is what I mean by claimed territories. If your god wanted to you know more, you would.”

There were two elevating platforms at the side of the room Shade led Carlos to, under the mezzanines. Between the platforms was a pole that rose up through a hole in the ceiling.

“What is the purpose of the pole?” Carlos asked as they moved onto an elevating platform and it started to rise.

“Fighting fires.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I am not responsible for what you do and do not comprehend, Priest Quilido,” Shade said as the elevating platform came to a stop. “This way, please.”