

Chapter 576

Reasons to Quietly Dread

Jason's body was rigid and tense, trembling with pain as he channelled mana, teeth gritted and fists clenched. Forcefully cycling mana through the matrix that was the magical framework on which his body was built accelerated Jason's recovery. This made the massive quantities of mana required to form new bodies for Shade the perfect physical and magical therapy.

Jason let about a groan of relief as a new Shade body manifested and he could finally take a pause. His whole body slumped as he let himself settle deeper into the plush recliner that enfolded him like an armchair made of marshmallows. The cloud-substance it was made from was fluffy white with blue and orange embellishments, much like the rest of the room. Another exercise Jason was using was modifying the cloud house, although he'd only done his recovery room thus far.

"One more?" he asked with a strained voice.

"No, that's enough for now," Neil told him. "Pushing yourself to an appropriate level and then getting back to it after a rest will be better for your recovery than going until you pass out. Farrah made me promise not to let you overdo it, and she was right to do so. Most people try to slack off through a process this painful, not keep going."

"Pain's been a companion longer than you have, Neil. I like you more."

"Oh, you find me to be a better companion than excruciating pain. That's very gratifying."

"Oh, definitely," Jason said. "You're in the top twenty for sure."

"I'm in the top twenty companions in a six-person team?"

"Thirteen person team, when you count familiars, then there's Rufus and his team, Alejandro Albericci—"

"Who?"

"The guy who put my new wardrobe together."

"The tailor counts as a companion?"

"I wear his work everywhere. Then there's Clive's wife."

"Clive's wife is imaginary!"

"Yeah," Jason said, shaking his head sadly. "Poor bloke. But that's why she's barely above you."

"If you're talking this much nonsense," Neil said, "You're clearly getting back to your old self. Gods help us. I'm going to leave you to rest."

As Neil reached the door, Jason called his name. As it lacked the usual joking tone, it arrested Neil's attention.

"Thank you," Jason said softly.

"It's my role," Neil told him.

"Yeah, well, you do it well."

Jason hobbled in a slow circle around the room, grateful for the soft floor under his aching feet.

"Shade, how is it that I can handle flooding my body with pain, but can barely put up with sore feet?"

"As I find myself at a loss to answer within the bounds of polite conversation, Mr Asano, I shall decline to answer."

"Shade, did you just call me a wuss?"

"I quite explicitly didn't call you anything, Mr Asano."

"Yes, but we both know the inferences you conjure up are more deadly than the swords Humphrey does."

"Thank you, Mr Asano."

Jason returned to the recliner at the centre of the room, wanting to collapse but lowering himself slowly.

"Shade, now that I'm recovering, albeit slowly, my senses are starting to return. I couldn't even tell what was going on with myself, at first. Now I'm starting to come to grips with the changes I've gone through, and I think I know why I've been feeling some uncharacteristic awkwardness from you."

"My apologies, Mr Asano. You should not be getting additional problems from me when you are already have enough to—"

"You don't owe me apologies or explanations, Shade. I've had to deal with a lot over the last few years, and none of that would have been possible without you. Did your dad send you to me just so I could free the souls trapped inside the flesh abominations, or was it because of the larger concerns involving the World-Phoenix and the Builder?"

"I honestly do not know."

"Did you get the option of saying no?"

"I did. My... what you might call siblings, are not curious by nature. Their interests begin and end in serving the Reaper. They only accept a position as a familiar if it serves the Reaper's interests. I am an outlier in having been a familiar so many times through my desire to explore the cosmos."

“Which is why being bound to that astral space for all that time must have been bloody awful for you. Nowhere to go and with no more companions than the vorger and the tormented souls trapped inside flesh monsters.”

“That was only a short time, in the scope of my existence, Mr Asano.”

“Yeah, but time doesn’t go faster just because you have a lot of it. But I guess that’s why you didn’t make the same choice as Colin and Gordon. I’m the latest in a long line of people you’ve had as a summoner, and there’ll be many more after. You’re kind of like Doctor Who and I’m one of your companions.”

Shade didn’t respond, Jason feeling the awkwardness in his familiar’s aura growing.

“It’s alright Shade. I mostly brought it up because I want to understand what is happening. I can feel that my bond with Colin and Gordon is stronger and I can feel that they both chose that. I’m not sure how or why it happened, though.”

“It is because of the changes in your spirit realm, Mr Asano. The astral throne and the astral gate in your spirit realm will give you much greater control over the spirit domains you have formed. As you are aware, you created the ones you already have by accident.”

“This is starting get confusing,” Jason said.

“It will only become more complicated, Mr Asano. Your spirit realm is the reality that exists inside you and your power is, for any practical intent, absolute. Your spirit domains are the territories you have claimed spiritually, imprinting your authority on. The one in Slovakia and the one in France.”

“I never intended to. I just wanted the transformation zones to not blast a hole in the side of the universe and wipe out the planet.”

“Nonetheless, Mr Asano, those territories were claimed. But they are crude, like a bowl made with bare hands from river clay. An astral throne and an astral gate are the sculpting tools, the potter’s wheel and the kiln you need to transform the crude clay into an immaculate bowl.”

“And that somehow allows my familiars to grow a deeper bond with me?”

“The astral throne gives you the power to create avatars within your spirit domains. You were already doing this unconsciously, although I was unsure what was happening until you informed me that you possessed an astral throne. Your familiars are automatically invited to bond themselves to you as avatars. I felt the draw but was uncertain as to its source.”

“What kind of bond are we talking, exactly?”

“A permanent one, Mr Asano. A summoned familiar is only connected to you for as long as the summoned vessel lasts. With each new vessel you call up, be it because the

old one was destroyed or you've ranked up, the familiar can choose to let some other astral entity occupy the vessel. The vessel will have the same powers, but the entity within will be a different one.

"Yeah," Jason said. "I appreciate that you three have all stuck with me through some fairly wonky events. Is quitting as a familiar common? I can't help thinking about Noreth."

Noreth, who Jason had most known as Mr North, had come to Jason's world as the familiar to a returning outworlder, the Network founder. After centuries together and an ideological falling out, the bond had been severed and Noreth ended up selling out his former bond companion. The Network founder had been captured by the United States branches of the very organisation he had founded, leading to the USA becoming dominant within the wider Network.

"Summoned familiars rarely end their tenure with such acrimony, even when there is a falling out," Shade explained. "The connection is not as integral as with a bonded familiar, and the summoned familiar is rarely in true danger through inhabiting a vessel. The vessel being destroyed costs them little beyond time and annoyance. Most familiars stay with the summoner throughout the summoner's life unless there is a major divergence of principle. To serve as a familiar gives us power, especially as the familiar of a high-ranker."

"What kind of power are you getting, exactly?"

"Trying to explain the nature of a purely astral existence to a physical entity is not possible. Even with your insight into astral forces, physical entities lack the capacity to conceptualise a manner of existence that involves no physical reality at all. Pure magic is too alien, its principles too fluid. You simply just aren't equipped to conceive of the concepts involved, let alone, comprehend them. Trying to explain them would be like trying to get a pebble to appreciate poetry or you to be quietly anonymous."

"Oh, that's hilarious."

"Mr Asano, we are in a clifftop temple you build to yourself while unconscious and projecting a kilometre high image of your inner soul."

"That was an accident."

"Yes, Mr Asano, but you do seem rather accident-prone."

"How about we go back to talking about familiar bonds."

"Very wise, Mr Asano. As I explained, an astral throne allows you to form avatars, but they are restricted to your spirit domains. But others bonded to you can deepen that bond to also serve as avatars, allowing them to be your agents outside of your spirit domains.

But that bond is forever. Colin and Gordon accepted that bond the moment it became available.”

Jason nodded.

“I understand why you didn’t,” Jason said. “If anything, I don’t understand why Colin and Gordon jumped in so quickly. You’re all so old I can’t even comprehend it, and we’ve only known each other a few short years. Shade, I know you feel awkward about not taking that bond, but there’s no need. With everything you’ve done for me, you’ve earned more gratitude than I’ll ever be able to pay back. Even if you choose to not return, the next time I summon a vessel, that’s okay. You’ll still be my friend and that’s the only expectation I have of you.”

Shade stood in silence for a long time before finally speaking.

“You do not have to pay me back for any gratitude you feel, Mr Asano. Friends do not count favours.”

Jason grinned.

“Good. Now, let’s talk about how you missed that I’d picked up an astral throne. With all your knowledge, between the weird guys the cloud house was producing and the bond call, shouldn’t someone as experienced and knowledgeable as you have realised?”

“That you obtained an astral throne in the middle of attempting to not explode? No, Mr Asano. That is utterly absurd, even by your standards.”

Jason had several reasons to quietly dread Dawn arriving for a talk. One was that he strongly suspected that it would be the last time he saw her in a long time, if not forever. He'd had his fill of extended separations from his friends and had no interest in going through it again, but of course, Dawn could not stay. Aside from having her own responsibilities, the power disparity was far too great for her to be slumming it with Jason and his companions. She was no longer a silver-rank avatar that could fight side-by-side with Farrah.

Another reason was that he was worried about the reaction, not of Dawn, but of her boss to the destruction of the artefacts Jason had absorbed into his soul. Now they were broken down entirely, their power fully absorbed and their original purposes rendered non-functional. There was no telling what that meant for the World-Phoenix's agenda and what it would do to Jason as a result.

Related to this was the fear that Jason had doomed the Earth to destruction. He didn’t believe the great astral beings would allow that to happen just because of an inconsequential entity like Jason, but they could also just cut their losses and move on.

What was a single planet to them beyond one of a trillion, trillion pawns in a game so vast that Jason couldn't even see the square he was positioned on?

Jason was unsure about what was to come, but he suspected it would hinge on the two items in his inventory that had been looted from the destruction of the artefacts. He'd looked at them many times since he'd gotten strong enough to open his inventory and read the descriptions, although he was still too weak to move objects in or out. He opened his inventory yet again to reread the description of the first item.

Item: [Fundamental Realm Authority Token] (transcendent rank, unavailable)

Symbol of authorisation to modify physical reality (decree, token).

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and can only be used by [Jason Asano] and [Zithis Carrow Vayel].
- Effect: Gives the wielder the authority to open gates to the fundamental realm of any physical reality.

Many things about the description left Jason wondering. From the description, it gave him the authority to access the underlying foundations of reality; the strange realm where reality cores could be picked up like cabbages and the fundamental aspects of the universe could be modified. It was a place he had accessed many times on Earth, undoing the damage the Network founder had done centuries before.

Similar work needed to be done in Pallimustus as well, albeit on a smaller scale. It was necessary to build the bridge that would save the Earth, but the authority to enter that realm wasn't enough. It didn't matter if he was allowed to open the gates if he lacked the power to do so. That ability had been lost by destroying the magic door artefact in his soul; the same one from which the token he now looked at had been looted.

There was also the rank of the item. Even the transcendent rank items he had seen in the past were listed as legendary, but this one listed the rarity as unavailable. That suggested he *really* wasn't meant to have it, which made him wonder who would be coming to take it away.

The last thing was the name, Zithis Carrow Vayel. The item was bound to Jason because he had looted it; because and the thing he looted it from was a part of his soul, or a bit of both. That left the question of who this Zithis person was and why they could use it as well. Jason was hoping it was the name of the Network founder who had gone to Earth centuries before, using the magic door Jason had ultimately absorbed to set in motion the events Jason was attempting to bring an end to.

It didn't strike Jason as a very Earth-like name, even for ye olden days. That was a strike against it, as the founder had been a returned outworlder, like himself. Jason hoped he was wrong, though, because he could only think of one other alternative. If it was the original name of the Builder, from when he was a mortal, Jason didn't imagine knowing it would bode well for him in general. For all he knew, the great astral beings would collectively annihilate him for peeking behind the curtain at one of their number.

Jason looked at the other item, which was largely obscured.

Item: [Firmamental Bridge Anchor] (transcendent rank, legendary)

???. (consumable, ???).

- Effect: ???.
- Uses remaining: 1/1

The familiar obfuscation was comforting. In the past, he'd been annoyed about transcendent items having their descriptions hidden from him, but having one revealed only made him feel worse. Seeing the question marks in the descriptions suddenly felt like putting on a comfy woollen jumper he found after thinking he'd lost it.

Looking at the question marks, suddenly his head spiked with pain, like when he'd tried reading the strange, alien script that had been in his event log. Suddenly Jason had a very bad feeling. He always knew that his translation power was why his system boxes appeared in English, but he suddenly started wondering if the reason he couldn't read the descriptions was really that his power rank was too low. He'd always assumed his rank being low and the items being high was the cause, but now he had a sneaking new suspicion.

Perhaps the reason it didn't translate was that the descriptions were in the strange, alien text. Was it the language of the great astral beings? Could he read the Builder-derived items because the Builder wasn't a native great astral being but an ascended mortal?

"Bloody hell," Jason muttered as he closed his inventory. He hated that these were the kinds of questions he was asking himself, and was back to dreading Dawn giving him the answers.

Chapter 577

Authority

Dawn's dimensional vehicle, a garden cottage inside an orb, approached Jason's cloud building. Standing at the edge of the garden, Dawn looked at the building that was now an architectural chimera of fluffy white cloud house and stark, black temple. Despite being unable to extend her senses into the building and check on Jason, she had stayed away since warning his friends. She had gone further than she intended with them, fearing she had left enough pieces for them to turn suspicion into certainty. That could spell disaster for Jason when the time came.

As for the reason Dawn had become involved in affairs in the first place, things were going well. Jason had done something insane and almost gotten himself killed, but that was inevitable. It was the reason she had bargained for a single chance to intervene, even if she then spent it protecting the Storm Kingdom instead.

From a strategic perspective, she would have been better off losing the battle to win the war, as the survival of Rimaros was not required for the World-Phoenix's agenda to reach fruition. While she might be a servant of the World-Phoenix, however, she was still her own person, which was an independence the World-Phoenix valued in its servants. The World-Phoenix had selected Dawn to watch over Jason for this very reason; to help her to reconnect with her fading mortality.

Dawn was forced to admit that whatever forces he was involved with and powers he accrued, Jason was unrepentantly mortal. Immortality had led her to push aside the individual moments and the small pleasures. This strange man had grounded her, reminding her of how to live in the moment instead of looking only to the infinite distance. She had made impractical choices she never would have before, yet could not find it in herself to regret them.

Flying down from her dimensional vessel in the sky, Dawn alighted in front of the strange cloud building, on the grass between the building and the river. It had been largely churned to mud by the many feet that had surrounded the cloud house when events were at their most dramatic but, like Jason, the grass was slowly recovering. She walked towards the open arch leading inside, satisfied that her task for the World-Phoenix was almost done. Jason would ride out the rest of the monster surge in recovery, unable to give her any more outrageous surprises.

"What do you mean, you extra-absorbed them?" Dawn asked.

She was sitting in a simple, firm cloud construct chair while Jason was sprawled in a large, soft one that looked like a throne made of pudding.

“Well,” he said, looking sheepish. “You know how I absorbed the Builder’s magic door when I was only meant to use it, and then you used that as a basis for the magic bridge I was supposed to absorb?”

“Yes,” Dawn said, her voice heavy with suspicion.

“They were clanking around in my soul, doing their respective tasks, which is fine, I guess. But then, you know, stuff happened. And in the course of stuff happening, the two magic things kinds of got... broken down for parts.”

“Broken down for parts?”

“And looted.”

“Looted?”

“When you just keep repeating what I say in an increasingly angry tone, it makes me think that you’re angry.”

“Jason, what did you do?”

“That same thing I always do! I almost got killed, weird stuff happened and now I have to deal with it to save the world.”

“You’re saying that the bridge you need to build and the door you need to build it are gone.”

“Uh, yep.”

Dawn closed her eyes and rubbed her temples.

“I didn’t think diamond-rankers could get headaches,” she muttered.

“I imagine it’s psychosomatic, given the control essence users have over their autonomic...”

Jason trailed off as Dawn’s eyes opened to glare at him.

“Rhetorical question, fair enough,” he said.

Hunched over, looking down at the floor, she spoke quietly, her voice weary.

“Tell me exactly what happened,” she instructed. “Those objects both possessed vast amounts of power, along with other things that someone of your rank has no place knowing even exist.”

“Yeah, I kind of figured that out. Good news: I managed to loot an item from each that can probably help with building a magic bridge. I reckon the bunch of the stuff I’m not meant to know about went into those items instead of back into my soul. I figure they weren’t really meant to be there in the first place, so my soul spat them back out.”

“What items?”

“One is called a firmament bridge anchor. It sounds like exactly what we need. After all, the bridge is partly built already. What we need to do is anchor it on this side, right.”

Some of the tension left Dawn's shoulders.

“That's not what I would call good,” she said, “but it's not an unmitigated disaster. It complicates things, but it at least gives you a path forward. More importantly, it doesn't give you something you shouldn't have.”

Jason's thoughts immediately drifted to the astral throne and astral gate residing in his spirit realm, still unexamined.

“What do you mean?” he asked lightly.

“I'm going to tell you something that is far above your position in the power hierarchy of reality, Jason, although it is something you have been hovering around the edge of for some time. You know that the great astral beings make deals with one another. They have done so over you.”

“Yep.”

“The key to this is authority. To the great astral beings, authority is a much more expansive concept than it is to you or even to me. It does have the usual definition as a right to exercise power, but to them, it is also power itself, and far more than that. To a great astral being, authority is not just the right to act but the strength to. It is a currency to be paid and bargained with; a resource to be consumed. It is who they are, what they are and what they do. A god embodies a singular conception and remains essentially unchanging so long as the concept doesn't change. A god of the rivers will be altered if all the rivers dry up, but does not change as the waters pass into the sea. Compared to this, great astral beings are more transactional in their power, their areas of influence and even their very essence. They deal in pacts and bargains, with authority as coin of the realm.”

“I'm not entirely sure I follow.”

“Nor should you. If you claimed you did, you would either be a liar or simply wrong.”

“You're saying the Dao that can be spoken is not the true Dao?”

“Something like that. I wouldn't have expected religion from you.”

“Oh, I'm full of surprises, me.”

“Yes,” Dawn accused. “You are.”

She shook her head.

“The important thing you need to understand,” she continued, not letting him sidetrack her further, “is that the authority of great astral beings is not just what they have or what they use but what they are. Authority is their flesh and blood. Their DNA. Their souls.”

“They can trade their souls in chunks?”

“Yes.”

“Is that why the Builder keeps getting away with crap he really shouldn’t? He started off mortal instead of being made of this super authority, so the idea of pushing the boundaries of a deal or ignoring the authority of another isn’t so alien?”

“I cannot say for certain, but that may be part of it. You, of all people, understand that profound changes in nature can lead to unexpected capability. But that is not what is important.”

“You realise that the very concept of transactional authority essentially means corruption, right?”

“Be careful where you tread, Asano.”

“The artefacts,” Jason said, his voice rising half an octave in his rush to change the subject. “They had some of that authority in them, didn’t they?”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “And that was acceptable, even in your soul, so long as those artefacts were operating as intended. The door was never meant to be absorbed, but part of the deal to provide the bridge resolved that. Using the bridge would have eliminated the authority within the door and within itself once your task was complete.”

“And now the authority is in these items I’ve looted and the programming your boss and Builder put on them is gone? I basically reformatted the computers they built, stripped them down for parts and bunked off with all the RAM sticks? Now I’m running around loose with all the power of that authority, like a monkey with an assault rifle.”

“That monstrous chimera of an analogy is not entirely inaccurate. Somehow.”

“So, why aren’t there diamond-rank leg-breakers coming to take the super authority back?”

“Because the great astral beings don’t know what you’ve done yet. You have yet to leave your spirit domain.”

“They really can’t see in here, then. Good to know.”

“Show me the items,” Dawn told him. “If the authority they hold truly has been condensed from the artefacts, it’s likely it took the form of items because ungoverned authority held by you might kill you.”

“Might?”

“It may surprise you, Mr Asano, to learn that this is my first time seeing a silver-ranker running around with unattended chunks of authority from not just one but two great astral beings. I’m not entirely sure what will happen.”

“They aren’t going to tolerate me having any of their secret sauce though, are they?”

“No, Jason. They will not. It will be unacceptable to any of them, not just the World-Phoenix and the Builder. I suspect you may be safe from the World-Phoenix, however, if the item you looted from the bridge is what I think. We should start with you showing me these items.”

Jason invited Dawn to a party so he could display his inventory through the party interface power.

“Can you read the description?” Jason asked her of the Firmamental Bridge Anchor.

“No, but I know this item. As I hoped, it’s something you can use to establish the bridge, and doing so will consume the authority in the item. The great astral beings will have no qualms with you possessing it because it remains single-use by nature. Once the task you have is fulfilled, the authority will be spent and gone. There will be problems with using it, compared to the bridge you destroyed to get it, but we can look at those later.”

Jason pulled up the description of the other item, the fundamental realm authority token.

“This is a problem,” Dawn said immediately. “You can’t have this.”

“I kind of had a feeling.”

“You will need to give it back. You do have some leverage, however.”

“Oh?”

“The fact that you have this is a major demonstration of the Builder’s failure. Your inconsequential stature means that all the blame for any of his authority falling into your hands is entirely placed on him.”

“But they’ll still shred me into my component particles for having it though, won’t they?”

“Yes, which is why you need to give it back. But because the Builder is in an awkward position, you can ask for some concessions from him.”

Jason nodded.

“I’ll give it some thought,” he said. “The great astral beings will know I have this as soon as I take it outside, right?”

“Or when I go outside. The World-Phoenix will know because I know.”

“Fair enough, but let’s put a pin in that and swing back to the complications with establishing the bridge. While I’m glad I didn’t ruin the whole plan, surely I put a dent in it. Starting with the fact that even if I didn’t give away this authority thing of the Builder’s, I don’t have a way back into the fundamental realm-space. I guess that’s the first concession I ask for.”

“Yes. That is a problem with an easy solution, as you only need access once to establish the anchor. The larger problem is the bridge itself.”

“I have the magic thing. You just said I could keep it.”

“That can anchor the bridge, but you still need to complete its construction. The bridge items I gave you would allow to you do that task, but now you will need to find a way to construct it yourself.”

“Can’t you show me how to do that?”

“Jason, my grasp of astral magic is formidable, but you have taken an already intricate situation and made it considerably worse. It may surprise you to learn that my expertise does not extend to building a bridge between a pair of worlds illicitly modified from the creation of their respective universes and connected through a link that was then tampered with and left to grow unstable over the course of centuries until those modifications were mostly undone by someone who barely understands what he’s doing and then used the link as a basis to build half of an astral bridge he also doesn’t understand with a magical artefact he accidentally digested and now can’t use to finish the job.”

“So, ‘no,’ is what you’re saying.”

“That is correct, Jason,” she said, biting off each word like they were the heads of small animals. “I’m saying no.”

“Good thing you don’t breathe or that would have been rough. Still, you have a plan, right? I mean, I could make a plan, but you’ve probably heard about my plans. It’s usually a two-steps-forward-one-step-back scenario. And the last step is onto a landmine.”

“As always seems to be the case with you, Jason, you are both the problem and the solution.”

“Which is what’s going on with my plans, which I personally think—”

“The messengers,” Dawn said, cutting him off.

“The messengers?”

“The messengers are the best practitioners of dimensional magic that I am aware of. I suspect that much of the magic that the Builder cult has been using comes from them, as part of whatever bargain brought them to this world.”

“And they have the magic I need?”

“Their strongest magic – the magic that allows them to stage invasions across dimensions – is predicated on the trait that makes them unique as a species,” Dawn explained. “Dimensional travel is exceedingly difficult. The reason the messengers can do it so well is that their gestalt bodies can endure dimensional forces that even others with

astral affinities, like celestines, cannot. This means that they can afford to travel via dimensional magic that other species would not survive.”

“You’re saying that their knowledge of dimensional magic is high, but their dimensional magic is crude.”

“Crude?” Dawn asked. “We’re talking about interdimensional travel magic that silver-rankers can use to transport thousands of people between realities. You have no idea of the refinement required to perform that kind of task with any less power than the magical equivalent of a sun.”

“Alright then,” Jason said. “They know their stuff. You think their theories will help be repair this bridge?”

“You should hope so,” Dawn said. “Otherwise, the World-Phoenix will be forced to take more forceful measures.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that after what you accomplished on Earth, she can send people to fix this. If she does, however, it will not be with finesse. Imagine preventing a teacup from falling off a shelf by drilling a hole in it and bolting it to the wall.”

“I take it that Earth is the teacup?”

“Yes.”

“Your boss doesn’t have anyone with finesse?”

“She doesn’t have anyone steeped in this from the beginning. Like it or not, Jason, your fingerprints are all over the half-completed astral bridge. It’s such a mess now that anyone else will have to bulldoze what’s there and build over the top.”

“Then how do I get these messengers to teach me their magic?”

“I have no idea. As far as I am aware, they won’t. Fortunately, this world is currently host to a great number of them whom you can ask.”

“Which is awfully convenient. If they weren’t around, you’d send me off on some other errand that would probably kill me, right?”

“Yes. But as they are here, you can ask them for access to their magic.”

“By which you mean ‘beat them up and take whatever magic theory they have so Clive and I can reverse engineer it,’” Jason said.

“See?” Dawn asked. “You’re on the right path already.”

“Oh, that’s terrific. Fighting some interdimensional threat in order to save the Earth because a bunch of transcendent beings have been messing with it. And of course, they refuse to help fix it because of their own nonsense rules or just being pricks in general. I can’t possibly imagine what that’ll be like.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you, Jason. You lack Neil’s bitter flair.”

Jason pushed himself out of the chair, reached for an object in his inventory and pulled it out. He snarled through the pain as he circulated his mana to do so until it appeared in his hand. A brown stone tablet, it had an image of a world engraved into it and no other features.

“Ow. I knew pulling stuff out of my inventory would sting to buggery.”

Jason started hobbling towards the door.

“Where are you going?” Dawn asked as she followed.

“To give this back,” he said. “You said I have to. Should give the people still watching this place a good show.”

“We should discuss what you’re going to ask for.”

“I know what I’m going to ask for.”

“I can help you—”

“No, you can’t, Dawn. We both know that.”

He flashed her a bright smile.

“You’ve helped me too many times already. I know you’ve been pushing the boundaries of whatever deals you’ve been making.”

“So has the Builder.”

“But will your boss let you get away with what he does?”

“No,” she admitted.

“I have to deal with the Builder, Dawn. I have to handle the messengers and I have to save the world. Again. And that’s okay. Interdimensional heroics are kind of my thing.”

She let out an exasperated groan as she followed Jason’s slow progress down the main stairs of the temple.

“You’ll have to leave your spirit domain for the great astral beings to sense that manifested authority you’re holding. Be careful what you say outside of your domain because there will be many eavesdroppers.”

They reached the open arch that marked the edge of the cloud temple and Jason’s spirit domain. Jason paused at the threshold.

“Okay,” he said. “So, I step out and wait for some Builder lackey to turn up and repo this thing?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“And we can’t discuss anything delicate outside of the spirit domain?”

“That’s right.”

“Good to know. By the way, I have an astral throne and an astral gate now.”

Jason stepped out of his spirit domain.

“WHAT?”

Chapter 578

The Kind of Pain I'm Used To

Jason Asano's cloud house was currently part house and part dark temple; not a clean division but a disorienting mismatch of pieces. It was as if someone had taken the shattered remnants of two very different buildings and assembled a new one from what they could salvage. This was the result of Jason slowly transforming the building from the state it had been left in after the events that transformed it and Jason both.

Jason had almost killed himself again in a move that was characteristically extravagant, self-destructive and desperate. To rescue his team and a group of civilians trapped in a mine below the sea floor, he had used the cloud house and his own body to channel forces that the house could handle but he could not. Only the frenzied intervention of friends and a number of peculiarities about Jason himself allowed him to survive at all, and the repercussions were heavy. The process had been more than a little overt, and now there were observers stationed near the cloud house, discreetly watching.

The damage to Jason ran soul deep; well beyond the ability of healing magic to repair. Recovery was a combination of time and exercising the mana in his magical body. Just circulating his mana to move around exacted a pain that was more than physical, being akin to a soul attack. If he hadn't long ago endured far worse, he would have had trouble functioning at all.

Jason pushed himself more and more with each passing day, since using magic accelerated his recovery. The more he could take the pain, the faster he would get back to full strength, and one thing Jason could do was take pain. Whether physical or spiritual, it was something with which he had become intimately familiar since magic's arrival into his life.

Always preferring to do a single task for multiple ends, one of Jason's most frequent magical exercises was reshaping his cloud house, turning it from an ominous black temple into a friendly, fluffy house made of clouds. It was still a work in progress, leading to the house's current unusual state.

Jason had been alternate dreading and anticipating a visit from his diamond-rank friend, Dawn. When finally turned up, they discussed the ramifications of what he'd done to himself and what his future held, once he'd recovered. In particular, they discussed one of the side effects of the magical event: Jason coming into possession of a certain object.

Great astral beings were the most powerful entities in the cosmos, and the nature of both themselves and their power was known as authority. After breaking down an item

created by such a being, Jason know had a piece of that power, physically manifested. It was only the barest sliver, but it came from an entity whose core purpose was to make new universes, so even that meagre amount was transcendently potent.

It was not the kind of object that should be in the hands of Dawn, who was at the peak of mortal power, let alone, Jason. She had made it clear that he needed to get rid of it before someone came to do it for him and, to her surprise, he agreed. Caught off guard by Jason making the sensible choice, she hadn't stopped him before he marched outside of the sanctuary of his cloud house.

Jason's cloud house was one of his spirit domains. He didn't have a full grasp of what a spirit domain was, exactly, since Dawn and Shade both refused to tell him, purportedly for his own good. Even so, simply possessing a spirit domain gave him a certain level of inherent understanding. He knew spirit domains were somehow related to power beyond that which mortals normally possessed. It was similar to the inner sanctuaries of temples to the gods, and inside his spirit domain, even gods could not spy on him. It was as if his spirit domain was territory from which they were excluded.

Once he was outside of his spirit domain cloud house, gods and great astral beings would immediately know about the sliver of authority in his possession. Knowing that they would not tolerate him keeping it, he settled in to wait for them to send someone along.

Dawn warned Jason not to speak of anything too delicate outside of his spirit domain. It would shield them from eavesdroppers both divine and otherwise, with many observers still watching the cloud house. Following that warning, Jason quickly mentioned something to Dawn that he didn't want to get yelled at about before stepping out of the spirit domain and onto the lawn in front of his cloud house.

Dawn was still standing in the archway entrance.

"You realise I can just yell at you from here, right?" she asked him.

Jason concentrated, grunting with pain as he used his magic. The spirit domain shrank into the building just enough to leave Dawn standing outside of it.

"You think you're funny, don't you?" she asked.

He grinned, although the lingering pain showed in his eyes.

"Yeah. And so do you."

She shook her head, not denying it as she stepped out to join him on the lawn. They made an odd pair, standing side by side. She had an elegant white dress and hair like delicate strings of rubies, sparkling in the sun. He was emaciated and hunched over like a retiree. He was also dressed like one, in a floral shirt and tan shorts, as if he'd wandered off from his warm-climate retirement community.

The cloud house was on a clifftop, close to a river that spilled over the edge to the lagoon below. There was an invisible magical barrier running along the cliff, keeping children – or their parents who had a few too many to drink – from going over the side.

It was a beautiful spot to spend a warm, tropical day. Wisps of cloud spilled from the flask-amulet around Jason's neck and took the shape of a floating couch, complete with a shade to keep the sun off. It was a minor use of magic, paining him barely enough to elicit a wince.

"I thought I was used to pain," he said, settling on the couch. "I've been impaled, burned with acid spit and had limbs chopped off. Completely off, and I've gotten used to it. This pain is something else, though."

"That's because your soul and your body are no longer separate things," Dawn said, sitting down next to him. "It's just one thing, now, and you went and ruined it. That shouldn't even be possible, but if only one lunatic will find a way, you're the lunatic for the job."

"I'm a trendsetter."

"You're suicidal."

"I am not suicidal. I don't try to get myself killed. It just kind of happens."

"You couldn't have avoided any of those deaths, then?" Dawn asked lightly.

"Oh, that's not fair. I definitely couldn't have avoided the first one. My crappy apartment got sucked through a dimensional rift. And the second and third deaths were heroic sacrifices, thank you very much. Do you know what happens when you don't turn up for the heroic sacrifice? The bad guys are all 'where'd he go?' 'I think he bunked off.' 'Great, lets blow up that city full of people.' And then a city gets blown up or some gold-rank monster arrives in it before the civilians have time to evacuate."

"What about when Shako killed you?"

"The Builder's henchman-in-chief? That guy sucks. He's diamond-rank. Killing me was just petty."

"You did mouth off at him."

Jason slapped his forehead in exaggerated realisation.

"Of course! I was rude to him. That totally justified murdering me."

"What did you expect him to do?"

"His job. The Builder didn't send him there to kill me."

Dawn suddenly stood up, moving out from under the shade to look up. Jason made the shade vanish with a wave of his hand to follow her gaze. He spotted a man with pale skin, a shock of red hair and brown robes, descending from the sky.

“He didn’t send me to kill you this time either Asano” Shako said. “But let’s see where the day takes us.”

“Oh, you have got to be kidding,” Jason complained. “I thought you took care of the ginger Jedi.”

“So did I,” Dawn said.

“Didn’t you say some scary lady took him away?”

“Carmen of the Sundered Throne,” Dawn said.

“Which is who of what exactly?”

“That is the concern of those who walk the upper echelons of the cosmos, Asano,” Shako said as he landed lightly on the ground in front of them. “It is not something you need to know.”

“That excuse went out the window the moment the bosses of you two started playing ‘blow up the planet,’ with me as the meeple.”

“Pawns do not get to question kings, Asano.”

Jason pushed himself out of the chair with a groan, like an old man.

“I’m so tired of this,” he said. “Once upon a time, I’d have said something pithy about pawns reaching the other side of the board and getting promoted. You’d look down on me, and then, somewhere down the line, you and I would get into some conflict. Again. And I’d get my arse kicked. Again. But I’d get what I want and you wouldn’t. Again. But I’m past tired of that game and I don’t even care how you crawled out of whatever hole they threw you in.”

“I do,” Dawn said. “You shouldn’t be here, Shako. No one should be seeing you for a very long time, even by our standards.”

“I’m only on a furlough,” Shako explained. “The Builder made a proposal and the Sundered Throne accepted. Preparations for the Prime Vessel that will succeed me have not been completed, so I was required in order to channel the Builder without killing the vessel. Which is something you apparently care about, Asano.”

“What proposal does the Builder have?” Dawn asked.

“You know how things are with great astral beings,” Shako said. “Everything is striking bargains and making pacts.”

“It’s because of the authority,” Dawn realised, talking to herself rather than Shako. “The Sundered Throne doesn’t want it in the hands of a mortal.”

“Yes,” Shako said. “Hand it over, Asano. Or are you refusing?”

Dawn’s head jerked to warn Jason but he held up a hand to forestall her.

"I know better than to answer that," Jason assured her. He then hobbled right into Shako's personal space, craning his neck to look at the taller man.

"You don't have any authority, do you Shako? Maybe you lug around a little for your boss, or used to, at least. But you've never had any of your own, have you?"

"Of course not. It is not my place."

"Well, I do have some," Jason said, plucking a brown marble tablet out of his inventory, grunting as the magic circulating in his body to do so pained him.

Shako moved faster than Jason could think, his hand shooting out for the tablet. Dawn moved to intervene but Shako was closer. The moment Shako's hand touched the tablet he was thrown away so fast it created a sonic boom. Jason was also tossed back, not by the same power as Shako but simply the backwash of the diamond-ranker's forced departure. He was hammered into the wall of his cloud house.

Shako was blasted through the clifftop safety barrier as if it wasn't there, the air shimmering along the cliff in a wave as the magic collapsed. It was designed to stop children and drunk people from falling off, not a diamond-ranker thrown by an even greater power.

Wind kicked like a squall from the raw speed of Shako being thrown away, making waves of the surface of the river and rattling windows of the nearby houses. Dawn rushed to check on Jason who had been pushed into the soft white wall of his cloud house like a strawberry into a cream cake.

"I'm fine," he told her as he pushed himself out of the cloud wall. He turned to look at the Jason-shaped hole it as it slowly filled back in. "I feel like a cartoon character."

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yeah," he said, his voice strained and gravely. "This is the kind of pain I'm used to."

"What was that?" Dawn asked, turning to look where Shako had shot off.

"Authority," Jason said, looking over at the tablet in the grass where he dropped it.

"Have you ever tried to steal authority?"

"Of course not," Dawn said.

"Well, now you know what happens if you do."

"Did you know what would happen when you took it out?"

"I could feel it," Jason said. "From the moment I accepted that it belonged to me. Shako could no more take it from me than he could burn down the cosmos." Jason held out his hand and the tablet flew into it, like an obedient child coming home.

Shako reappeared, flying through the air to land in front of them.

“You should have known better,” Jason told him. “That isn’t the kind of power you can just take.”

“That power doesn’t belong to you.”

“You’re getting punted halfway across the ocean says differently. Now, they sent you specifically for a reason. Get your boss on the line.”

“He can’t,” Dawn said. “Sending Shako here was pointless. There’s a pact in place, meaning the Builder isn’t allowed to use vessels here.”

“He’s used them before, deal or no deal,” Jason said.

“The Builder has only spoken through vessels,” Shako said in defence of his master. “The ones you saw were not used for anything.”

“Speaking *is* a thing,” Jason said. “But your boss pushing boundaries of the deals he makes isn’t the point. The point is that I’m giving him permission.”

“That’s not your permission to give,” Dawn said.

“It is today,” Jason said. “And get your boss here too, while we’re at it. I like you, Dawn, but it’s time I spoke with your manager.”

“You don’t get to dictate to great astral beings,” Shako admonished, his tone that of an exasperated adult talking to a child.

“No?” Jason snarled, holding up the tablet. “Then lets see how much damage I can do with this before one of you kills me.”

“You don’t have the—”

“Shut up Shako!” Dawn yelled. “Are you seriously going to test the resolve of a man who sacrificed his only resurrection rather than let you walk over him?”

Shako grimaced but remained silent.

“That’s what I thought,” Jason said. “Get your bosses here.”

“Jason, I wasn’t just saying it when I said that isn’t your permission to give. There is a pact in place that governs those rules.”

“And pacts are about trading authority, right?” Jason asked and tossed the tablet back onto the ground. “I just so happen to have some, burning a hole in my pocket.”

Chapter 579

A New Man

“You are breathtakingly presumptuous,” Shako told Jason.

“Of course I am,” Jason told him. “Have you not been paying attention?”

Jason and the two dimension-travelling diamond-rankers were talking outside of his cloud house. Jason couldn't sense the various eavesdroppers from the local factions because of his injured state, but he knew they were listening avidly.

“Jason, this isn't how it works,” Dawn told him. “You can't just join in a pact between great astral beings.”

“No? Then what are you two even doing here? Look at you both. Former prime vessels of two different great astral beings, and you're hanging out with the likes of me. They apparently even let this guy out of space jail so his boss could have a chat.”

“Speaking with a great astral being is one thing, Jason, but placing yourself in their circle is another. Shako is right; it's a height of presumption that I never imagined anyone reaching.”

“Tough,” Jason said. “I'm sick of being a meeple in the board game of some sky wizards.”

Jason grimaced from the pain of using his mana as the wall behind him opened up to reveal the room inside. He stepped into the room and the tablet containing the authority taken from the Builder leapt from where he had tossed it on the grass, into his hand.

“I know your bosses won't let me keep this,” he said. “But I don't think they can take it without killing me, either. So, if they want to come to the table and talk, knock on my door. Otherwise, I need to get rid of this, so I'm going to see what I can do with it.”

“Jason,” Dawn said, frustration mixing with worry in her expression. “That would be a bad idea if you were in full health, let alone, now.”

The wall closed again, separating Jason from the others. The diamond-rankers knew there was nothing to do but wait for directions from their respective masters.

“You're starting to see why I killed him, aren't you?” Shako asked.

“Sending you here has only complicated things further,” she said. “Jason is tricky to deal with at the best of times, without getting you involved. What can the Builder possibly have to say, and why would the Sundered Throne allow it when there is a pact in place?”

“Does your great astral being consult you on its intentions? Mine just tells me what to do. It told me to come here and speak to you and Asano, not what it has to say or why.”

“Me as well?”

“Yes. What is the World-Phoenix telling you?”

“To convince Asano not to listen to you or the Builder, and then leave.”

“Is that what you’re going to do?”

“I could. If I asked Jason, as his friend, to not hear the Builder out and send you away, he would.”

“Will you?”

“No. Because he knows that I would be doing it for the World-Phoenix and not for him, and that’s not how it works with friends.”

“Are you really telling me that child is a friend? You’ve had assignments that lasted longer than his entire life. You’ve finished walking the path. You’re a bestowal of authority away from true transcendence and leaving the last of your mortality behind.”

“That’s exactly the point, Shako. The World-Phoenix knew that I was not as ready as I had believed. I needed to reconnect with my mortality in order to realise what I would be giving up. And it was right; I wasn’t ready. I’m still not.”

“If you’re not, then what hope do the rest of us have?”

“Forever is a long time, Shako. In the scale of the cosmos, we are no less children than Jason. That is why he and I can be friends. He is very good at showing you the joys of the short-lived.”

“If you say so. If you can’t do what the World-Phoenix asked of you, what will happen?”

“The World-Phoenix trusts my judgement. And I have moved past my time as a prime vessel; I am a hierophant, now. While I continue to serve, I no longer stand amongst the servants. I am my own agent, choosing my own path. Sometimes that means serving my own ends, and not just those of the World-Phoenix.”

“Something to look forward to,” Shako said. “My time as the prime vessel came to an end early, but when I am done here I will return to the Sundered Throne’s confinement. I will not join the ranks of the hierophants for a very long time.”

He smiled, weary but hopeful.

“At least these events will be behind us.”

“Why does Asano irk you so much? I know that Asano’s aura is like a taunt, but surely you aren’t so weak-minded as to let that govern you.”

“Asano’s aura is no longer repellent,” Shako said. “The Fundament Gate he took from the Builder is gone. Sensing his aura is no longer like scraping a nail down a chalkboard. But can you really tell me that this jumped-up mortal doesn’t irk you?”

“We are all still mortal, Shako. At least a little. But there has to be more to it than that.”

“Yes,” Shako said. “Far more to it. You know how it is when the great being’s influence leaks through to you.”

“Yes. But what makes the Builder...”

Dawn trailed off.

“That’s why not,” Shako said. “The World-Phoenix just told you not to ask, didn’t it?”

“Yes,” Dawn said with a frown. “It’s keeping things from me. I know there are things that are not mine to know, but this feels different. Like deception.”

“Ah,” Shako said. “I believe I’ve figured out why the Builder sent me here. It wants me to explain something to you and Asano, but knows the World-Phoenix won’t let me. So it will take the chance of reclaiming the lost authority to do so itself. Your World-Phoenix can’t stop that because Asano won’t listen to it. But he’ll listen to you, so it told you to stop me.”

“I’m not going to do that,” Dawn said. “The privilege of being a Hierophant is that I do not have to put aside my own principles anymore. I have the power to say no. But I won’t go against the World-Phoenix entirely. I won’t stop you from speaking with Asano, but I won’t listen to what your master has to say, either.”

The pair shared a long look, each realising that their masters had decided on how to go forward.

“Or maybe I will,” Dawn said.

Inside the cloud house, Dawn found Jason sprawled on a cloud couch, his face twisted as he waited for the pain to fade. Dawn gave him a flat look and he slung his legs off, making room for her to sit beside him.

“What did you do?” she asked as she settled into the fluffy cloud furniture.

“I tried to open up the portal to my spirit realm.”

Jason’s spirit domain was the area over which he held dominion. This included the cloud house, as well as two areas back on Earth. His spirit realm, was a linked but separate concept. An otherworldly pocket reality, it shared many traits of an astral space, but existed within Jason himself; not in terms of location but by being an aspect of his soul.

Originally, the spirit realm had been an almost metaphorical space of the spirit, in which only Jason and his familiars could enter. When Jason’s body and soul merged to become an entity both physical and spiritual, his spirit realm took on physical properties,

allowing others to enter, like an astral space. Operating between what did and didn't exist, it was utterly inviolable and only accessible through portals opened by Jason himself.

"What did I tell you?" Dawn scolded. "With the state you are in, your spirit realm will be a ruin right now. There's no telling what damage you could suffer if you actually managed to open it."

"You may have noticed," Jason said through gritted teeth, "that my days of being a small fish in a very big pond are coming to a middle. I keep jumping hurdles, certain that over the next one will be some mythical realm where I'm not constantly confronted with powers that could annihilate me in a heartbeat. Except that every hurdle turns out to be a cliff and I just fall down deeper."

"Jason—"

"I'm done telling myself they're hurdles, Dawn. I'm done feeling sorry for myself and looking for some future that will never come. I'm going to jump off every damn cliff that comes my way, eyes open. It's long past time to nut up and accept that it's never going to change until I can tell people like you and Shako and the creepy space monsters you work for to climb on their bikes and pedal off."

Dawn sighed, looking at him with pity.

"Good," she said. "I'd like to tell you it won't always be like this, but we both know better. You'll get a respite, but what comes after will be worse. I still can't tell you what it is, and you may come to hate me for that. But you've already lost, and you don't realise that you've been fighting this whole time."

She bowed her head.

"Were you really going to try and use the authority?"

"There's a movie I quite like," Jason said. "You know what genetic engineering is, right?"

"Yes."

"This movie is set in a time where the first generation of designer children have grown up and all but displaced ordinary people in the workplace. The superior people..."

Jason pointed at Dawn.

"...have all but completely displaced the vanilla humans."

He pointed at himself.

"Jason—"

"Just listen to the story. Those who were strong got everything, and the others weren't even given a chance to try. The story centres on a man who was conceived in the old way, while his younger brother was genetically refined to be superior. As the two

brothers grew up, they would play a game where they would swim as far as they could into the water, and whoever turned back first would lose. The point was that they had to make sure they had enough energy to make it back to shore when they finally turned around. If they pushed too hard, they might get exhausted and drown.”

“Jason—”

“I said listen to the story.”

“I know the story, Jason. The only time the weaker brother ever won was when he decided to keep going, without saving anything to swim back. You’re talking about the resolve it requires to beat those who have every advantage over you.”

“You’ve seen *Gattaca*?”

“I saw it with you. Your sister made blue coconut daiquiris and her husband sketched out how to modify an insulin pump to work as a discreet urine delivery system.”

“Oh yeah. That was a good night.”

“I get what you’re saying, Jason. That for someone like you to beat out someone like Shako, you have to be willing to go further.”

“People like you and Shako can see right through my aura. He’s got the stronger hand, but the only way I can bluff him is to not bluff. I have to be willing to commit, regardless of the consequences, if I want him to put down his cards and do what I need him to do.”

Dawn let out a resigned sigh.

“You know this is why powerful people keep dragging you into things, right? It’s not that you do things others can’t. It’s that you do things others won’t. When you first passed through the deep astral, your soul trailing along the link between your world and this one, the World-Phoenix gave you a tablet. It was one of countless seeds planted to move this situation in the direction it wanted. You’re the seed that sprouted, and your continued growth in the face of harsh conditions is why so many beings are paying attention to what remains a frail, fragile sapling.”

“I’m not so sure that’s flattering.”

“Jason, there are very few people I’ve encountered that I would consider truly remarkable. Genuinely, just a few. A man who conquered a world obsessed with war using only his words. A woman who became diamond rank barely ten years older than you are now. A man who confronts great astral beings with so little power it may as well be none and he keeps winning anyway; reshaping worlds and claiming power that should belong to the gods.”

She gave him a bright-but-sad smile, her ruby eyes sparkling.

“After you lose the fight to come, doing anything about it afterwards is impossible. But I’ve watched you do the impossible before. You’re already like nothing I’ve ever seen. All the things you’ve been through have made you powerful in ways that are more than just essence abilities. I’m going to leave you, soon, but I want you to keep devouring whatever the cosmos throws at you and turning whatever they try and stop you with into strength.”

“You’re talking about this mysterious danger that you and Noreth keep refusing to tell me about.”

“Yes. You have no chance to succeed at what lies ahead of you, Jason. But I want you to anyway. I have no idea how, but that’s your area. The best I can do is give you the chance to figure that out.”

Jason turned to Dawn and clasped her in a hug. She was startled; such a simple gesture but she hadn’t felt such simple, physical reassurance since long before Jason was born.

“You have a lot of magic, don’t you?” he asked her. “You’re very tingly.”

Dawn’s laughter was like water being release from a burst dam, the tension spilling out of her to relieve the pressure.

Jason and Dawn both looked refreshed as they came down the stairs of the cloud house. The stairs and large gothic arch were a remnant of the dark temple state the cloud house had been in and they walked out looking almost like different people. Jason especially was a new man in a casual but elegant white suit, from the collection made for him by Alejandro Albericci. No longer hunched, he moved slowly but casually, his characteristic look of general amusement once more in place.

Walking down the stairs by his side, Dawn had also made an outfit change, to a simple, yellow summer dress. Her brilliant red hair was no longer shining like fire, instead spilling down her back in a rich, dark auburn.

“I didn’t expect that to help my recovery so much,” Jason said. “Did you know that would happen?”

“I did not. I feel a little strange.”

“Of course you do. That’s the Jason Asano guarantee.”

She gave him a sideways look and he threw his head back, laughing. Shako looked up at them from just outside the arch, at the edge of Jason’s spirit domain.

“Did you stop for lunch? You were meant to go in and bring him back out.”

“Which I did,” Dawn said as she and Jason arrived in front of Shako. “And yes, we stopped for lunch.”

Jason pulled a plate from his inventory, which contained steaming, ring-shaped objects in a deep-fried crust and sprinkled liberally with white and brown powder.

“Argy fruit fritters,” Jason said. “A personal twist on a local favourite. The powder is smoked and ground Calcat root and desiccated, powdered gleamberries. The result is quite similar to cinnamon sugar, but with more of a rich, earthy taste.”

“I’m not here to eat,” Shako said.

“Shako, show some graciousness and let the man be a host.”

Shako looked startled for a moment.

“You’re right,” he said, to Jason’s surprise. “You are, indeed the host, Mr Asano, and some proprieties should be observed.

He took one of the fritters, holding and biting into it in an oddly delicate manner. His eyebrows went up.

“This is not entirely terrible.”

Chapter 580

Negotiating Position

While Dawn and Shako stood eating fritters from the plate he had handed over to Dawn, Jason prepared for his imminent discussion. A floor of white cloud substance extended from the wall of the cloud house, covering the grass like a plush carpet. Three chairs rose up, facing each other in a triangle formation, with a small table in the middle. Each participant claimed a chair, the plate going onto the table.

Jason had extended the area outside of the spirit domain that made up the interior of his cloud house. He was unsure if the great astral beings could still possess their vessels, Dawn and Shako, within its confines. He had no intention of finding out, having an instinctive understanding that inviting them inside was something that would be extremely dangerous to him.

Jason mused on the nature of exclusion and domain, which he was increasingly realising was a fundamental aspect of magic. Even the most powerful beings in the cosmos could not violate the sanctity of a soul, even one belonging to the weakest and most lowly mortal. Similarly, Jason's spirit domain was able to exclude beings powerful enough to annihilate the planets his domains rested on.

"The Builder has agreed to meet with you and discuss the nature of the pact," Shako told Jason.

"As has the World-Phoenix," Dawn added.

"And what of the Reaper?" Jason asked. "He was part of this pact, right?"

"We don't know," Dawn said. "He is aware of this discussion and will send a representative or not. So long as the Builder and the World-Phoenix agree and it doesn't affect the Reaper's interests, the pact can be amended without the Reaper's involvement."

"Fair enough," Jason said. "So, what can I expect?"

"What you see will not be us, and it will not be the great astral beings," Dawn explained. "It will be the great astral beings through us; neither us nor them, yet somehow both. Something new, created by a middle state between mortal and transcendent."

"Yeah, I met the Thadwick version of the Builder. Still a petty tool bag, but better at hiding it, at least. How do we start?"

In an instant, the body language of Dawn and Shako shifted. Shako went stiff, his posture rigid. Dawn became more languid, rolling her neck and shoulder with a slight grunt. Shako's eyes had become dark brown orbs, while Dawn's now swirled with yellow and orange, glowing like fire. Jason's senses were not at their best, but there was no

mistaking the power of the auras now exuding from their bodies. Being so close to them, contained within their vessels, felt like being in front of a nuclear reactor, behind a safety screen. The power within was contained but, if unleashed, would trigger a level of annihilation that would change maps.

Jason hadn't felt that level of power when he met the Builder previously, when he used Thadwick as a vessel. He was unsure if that was a factor of Thadwick being a far weaker vessel or Jason's aura senses at the time being undeveloped. Compared to that time, both Jason's senses and the Builder's vessel were orders of magnitude more powerful.

Jason was holding the tablet containing the authority taken from the Builder in his hand. The power of the tablet was his, and even more so, it was somehow *him*. It was a part him, but a deadly part, like a cancer. The sensation of threat had been growing from the moment he claimed it and had reached a point that was beginning to feel dangerous.

Just possessing authority was something he was not ready for, and would likely destroy him if he didn't get rid of it in relatively short order. He suspected that this was what burned through vessels so quickly, but at least this was not an intruding force, like being possessed by a great astral being. It truly belonged to him, so it wasn't devouring him like an aggressive parasite.

Jason felt the authority react to the two great astral beings possessing Dawn and Shako. It resonated with them, giving Jason insights into how authority, and the great astral beings that were made of it, functioned. He suspected he was no more meant to have that knowledge than the power that made it possible.

"Let's not bugger about," Jason said. "I can't keep this thing and you can't let me keep it. But I just can't give it up either, can I? That's what your boy Shako didn't understand: that it has to be traded. You really need to better inform your staff. Hold some meetings. Workflow synergy, that kind of stuff."

"Yes," the Builder said, his voice like the grinding of stone. "Authority must be traded."

"I have to say, you're much more impressive in your own car," Jason told him. "Last time I saw you it was a rental, and that thing was clapped out."

"Didn't you just say you weren't going to bugger about?" The World-Phoenix asked.

Jason looked her up and down, his expression surprised but not dissatisfied.

"I lie frequently and transparently," he told her. "You're a lot more sultry than I expected. You've really dug out the fun side Dawn keeps locked away, haven't you?"

"Dawn is my former prime vessel," The World-Phoenix said. "Even the most powerful and well-prepared vessel can only contain a shard of my being for so long before it starts

to break down. This will likely be the last time my servant ever channels me, and elements of her mind and soul may become prominent in ways they otherwise would not.”

“Then I’m honoured,” Jason said with uncharacteristic sincerity. “Whatever you and I have going on, serving you means a lot to her.”

“You don’t need to ply me with sentiment, Asano. I don’t care about your feelings.”

“But Dawn does, and of the two of you, she’s the one I actually care about.”

A smile curled the corner of The World-Phoenix’s lips.

“She became more attached to you than anticipated. I thank you for reminding her of her mortality.”

“You’re welcome. But while she and I are friends, you and I have an arrangement predicated on mutual benefits and shared agendas.”

“Yes. You have proven a viable means to forestall the worst ramifications of what the Builder’s predecessor has done.”

“And you organised for me and my friend to come back to life. Thank you for that.”

“I am at the limit of what I can accomplish in that regard. I helped direct the changes you have gone through, but those changes are beyond my influence, now. What you do with that power is for you to decide. The consequences of those decisions are for you to endure.”

“I know. The buck stops here. This guy owes me a life, though.”

“I owe you nothing,” the Builder said.

“Your bloke slapped my head off while running errands for you.”

“He was punished. A price was paid.”

“Not to me.”

Jason’s words were soft yet the world seemed to tremble. The cloud house behind him rapidly shifted as a portion of Jason’s authority was consumed to change it. It was unintentional on Jason’s part; a reflexive action made in quiet anger, and the price was high. Jason felt like his inside were on fire.

The house shifted from an architectural chimera to a looming pagoda made of dark crystal. Within the crystal, blue, gold and silver light swirled and sparkled. It was the same design that existed at the heart of his permanent spirit domains, on Earth.

“You should not be spending your authority,” The Builder said impassively.

“No kidding,” Jason growled through gritted teeth as his fingers dug into the armrests of his cloud chair. His whole body felt like it was on fire and he realised that he was his own vessel.

“Are you able to continue?” Dawn asked.

“Yeah,” Jason croaked. “That was rough, but I’ve had worse. Ask this guy about how we met.”

“You need to trade that power away,” The Builder said.

“Yep,” agreed.

“You’re not in much of a negotiating position, Asano,” The World-Phoenix told him.

“But I am in a negotiating position.”

“Yes,” The World-Phoenix acknowledged. “At your rank, that is relatively unusual.”

“Only unusual?”

“You may have stumbled across a little of our power, but the cosmos is still more vast than you can comprehend. You’re not that special.”

“You sound like my mum. But I have a seat at the table, now.”

“And now that you do,” Builder said, “what is it that you want?”

“A few things. Nothing big for the likes of you, but big for the likes of me. Then you get my tiny scrap of authority and I get to not have it melt me.”

“State your requests,” The Builder said.

“I need to finish what I started,” Jason said. “But I’m going to need a little assistance because I broke your toys.”

“Reckless,” the Builder said.

“I’m not the one who broke the planet. That was one of your lot sodding about, and I’m the fool you roped in to clean up your messes. So maybe keep your dismissive comments to yourself.”

“That was my predecessor.”

“And task one should have been fixing the reason you got the job in the first place, yet here we are. I have a plan to figure out finishing the dimensional bridge, but I can’t access the fundamental realm to mess with reality and anchor it anymore. I need someone to open the way for me. Just once, when the time comes.”

“Acceptable,” The Builder said.

“Acceptable,” The World-Phoenix echoed.

“Great, making progress,” Jason said and turned his gaze on the Builder. “The next thing is about your forces on this planet. I want them gone. Today.”

“The fragment of authority you hold is not enough that you can dictate my actions.”

“Your boy killed me. Then he tried to do it again.”

“That has been resolved.”

“You paid a price to who? Dawn’s boss here? The Reaper? You have a debt to me.”

“I owe you nothing.”

“I will accept Asano’s proposal that you withdraw from this world immediately,” The World-Phoenix said. The Builder turned to glare at her, and the smile she returned him was laden with provocation.

“I do not accept,” the Builder said, turning back to Jason. “You have no leverage, Asano. You will take what we are willing to give and be grateful for it, or the authority will kill you.”

“Is that so? Then I might as well see what I can do with it on the way out. Come on out, lads.”

Jason’s familiars emerged from the cloud house, assembling behind him in a row. Shade was a figure of living shadows with the silhouette of a butler. Colin was in his blood clone form, looking like a sculpture of Jason made by pouring blood into a mould and waiting for it to set. Gordon was the most alien, being a cloak draped over a swirl of nebulous energy that looked like an eye. He was orbited by six orbs that looked like smaller nebula eyes, captured inside spheres.

“What are your intentions?” The Builder asked.

“Shade here was a bit vague, back in the day, about exactly what summoned familiars get out of the deal. But now I know what he was talking about. It’s authority. Astral beings run on it, don’t they? Most of them will be operating on fumes compared to you lot, but still. And being a familiar generates it, somehow, doesn’t it? Probably not a lot, but not everyone is a great astral being, are they? A little probably goes a long way.”

“You would give the authority to these beings?” The Builder asked.

“You can’t give authority,” Jason said. “That’s why we’re having this discussion. I think I can swing handing it over as a performance bonus, though. It might be pushing the rules a little, but isn’t that the prerogative of a mortal? You seem to get away with it enough, and you aren’t even mortal anymore.”

“You would give it to the Reaper’s child?” the World-Phoenix asked, her voice not complaining but curious. “The others I understand. They are young and have bound themselves to you permanently; a demonstration of faith. But the Reaper’s child could take the power and abandon you. He is older than the human race on your planet and you aren’t even thirty. You think you have his full measure?”

Jason waved the tablet in his hand.

“I know this authority matters to you and I mean nothing. But it goes the same way back: I don’t care about it beyond using it to get what I want. And if what I want is to thank my friend, I will. I don’t need his full measure. If Shade wants to take this authority, bunk

off and leave an intern in his place, that's fine. He'll still be my friend, and with the friend he's been to me, he more than deserves it."

Jason could hide nothing from the senses of the great astral beings. Anything less than complete sincerity and they would have felt it immediately.

"I probably can't use this authority myself without it killing me, but finally giving this lot their back pay won't hurt me at all, I'm guessing. Which you knew, but didn't bother to tell me. Otherwise, I might think I'm not in such a crappy negotiating position, right?"

"The Reaper's spawn told you," The Builder said.

"Actually, he didn't. He could have come sniffing after it, like a dodgy third cousin after you win the lottery, but he didn't say anything. Even when I personally think he should have. He likes to keep things from me. For my own good."

"And you still trust him enough to give it to him anyway?"

"I'd say in a heartbeat, but none of us have hearts. I think there's an important metaphor, there. But the point is, I'm not stuck with whatever crappy options you two put on the table. So, back to you pulling out early, Builder."

"No."

"Look, you've already plundered most of the astral spaces you're going to get from this world. At this point you're running out the clock on the monster surge before you have to pack up anyway, hoping to scoop up some dregs. It's not a lot to give up for you, but it means less people die fighting, which is a lot to me. Plus, I'll even listen to whatever it is you sent Shako here to tell me in the first place. Agree to pull out, I'll hand over all the authority and it's a done deal. Then we can have that chat."

"Accepted," the Builder said immediately. "Deal struck."

"No," the World-Phoenix said, sitting forward in her chair.

"Too late," The Builder told her. "You have already accepted."

"There was an addendum to the terms."

"No. The terms were struck and Asano and I decided to have a conversation after. It is a separate issue and the bargain is made."

The World-Phoenix silently looked at the Builder. After a moment, his face twisted with rage.

"ASANO!"

Jason didn't see the Builder or the World-Phoenix move. Like a video skipping frames, suddenly they were in front of him, leaning over the coffee table as the World-Phoenix held the Builder back.

“Quickly!” the World-Phoenix yelled at Jason. “Feed the authority to your familiars. If he has no reason to be here, he’ll be forced to leave his vessel. It’s the terms he reached with the Sundered Throne.”

Feeling the Builder’s palpable fury, Jason was about to follow the World-Phoenix’s directions when he stopped. The tablet flew from his hand to touch the Builder and Jason transferred the authority to him. He immediately felt the Builder’s presence vanish and Shako dropped to his knees, trembling.

“Bargain made, bargain complete,” Jason told the World-Phoenix as she turned to look at him.

“That is not what I told you to do.”

“That’s kind of my thing. I’m sure Dawn can tell you all about it. And maybe you can tell her what you just did to the Builder to sent him berserk? Or exactly what it is that he wants me to know, and why you don’t want me to know it.”

She smiled.

“The things that make you useful also make you trouble.”

“I think you just titled my memoir.”

“Or your epitaph.”

“It’s a good line, either way. And now the deal is struck, so it’s time for you to go.”

“You don’t have questions for me? It’s a rare chance.”

“Whatever games we’d play, you’d win. Give me my friend back.”

“Not many have the courage to dismiss a great astral being, Asano.”

“I bet there are, but you blow most of them up.”

The World-Phoenix grinned and then her face went blank. Dawn’s eyes turned from fiery orbs to their usual ruby red. She staggered slightly, Jason supporting her and helping her into a chair. He transformed it onto a couch and sat next to her as she leaned into him, exhausted.

“Are you alright?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” she told him.

“He seems less alright,” he told her, and they turned to look at Shako. He was still in his knees, looking catatonic. “I think whatever your boss did to the Builder did a proper number on him.”

“Fortunately, the Sundered Throne sealed the majority of Shako’s power, even as a vessel,” Dawn explained. “It allowed the World-Phoenix to suppress him easily.”

“Your boss is the one that set him off. How did she do that?”

"I don't know," Dawn said, her expression troubled. "If I did, I very much doubt I would be allowed to tell you."

"And here was me starting to like your boss. Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yes. It's just been an increasing strain over the last few decades, which is why I trained a replacement."

"I can't imagine. You've been doing a job on the kind of time scale they use for civilisations and now it's over. That's so far out of my experience I have trouble even empathising enough to be supportive."

"If you live long enough, Jason, you realise that change is inevitable. Even the force that creates universes changed."

"You're not *that* old, are you?"

"No," she said with a laugh, and slapped him playfully on the arm.

They leaned back into the plush couch.

"So, what now?"

"You made your deal. The Builder's forces will leave this world. Today."

"Good," he said, the tension visibly leaving his body.

"You just saved a lot of lives, Jason."

"I'm an adventurer. It's the job."

"What you just did is not what adventurers do."

"Hey, I don't tell you how to flit about the cosmos giving quests to rakishly charming outworlders, so you don't tell me how to fight evil. Speaking of which, what do we do about this guy?"

They both looked at Shako.

"Should we draw something on his face before he comes to?"