

## 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.

"Lets 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?”