

Chapter 889

The Power Looming Over Us All

Loren and Jason were on opposite couches. The setting was casual, but their discussion had the potential to shape the Brightheart city for generations.

"I respect that you have done what you can to give us autonomy," Loren said, "but there are some issues that can only be resolved by you."

"Religious issues?"

"Yes. You are, of course, aware of much of the political situation in the city. Many diplomatic and religious issues are settled outside of your domain, however. In one of the surface shafts, a town has been dug into the sides. It was placed just beyond the area of control because it was first excavated when the transformation zone was active."

"People waited there for the zone to drop. I remember."

"Since that time, it has been massively expanded. We call it Outer Rexion now. The statue of your friend is there. The population is mostly transitory. Merchants and diplomats from the surface. Most of the churches regularly cycle through their assigned clergy, as few enjoy spending so much time underground. Only those worshipping gods such as Earth, Stone and Deep seem to like it very much."

"But their inability to situate temples in the city proper is causing issues?"

"Yes. The priests tell me that you hold dominion and the gods cannot encroach upon it with their power."

"That's correct."

Loren gave Jason an uneasy look.

"It's true, then. You have the power to refuse the gods?"

"It's not as contentious as you make it sound. It's true that I was mistrustful of gods when I first came to this world, but they're like anyone else. You have good ones and bad ones. I know that isn't news to you. Undeath is a complete prick, obviously, but some of the others have been kind and friendly to me."

He scowled.

"And a little thirsty," he grumbly added.

"Thirsty? Gods drink?"

Jason let out a chuckle.

"Never mind. Tell me about the ramifications of the temples being excluded. I'm assuming there has been some resentment?"

“There has. Not from the clergy, to my surprise. Their gods have apparently explained things to them and they’ve been quite understanding. The resentment comes from two sides, each presenting their own challenges.”

“One being external, I assume? People asking that if you’re refusing access to the gods, what are you hiding? Are the dark gods taking root here, far from the light?”

“Exactly. Even if the church officials and our diplomatic contacts understand, some people will believe what they want, regardless of the truth. Anger is easy to stoke, and those who would undermine our autonomy to exploit us are not shy about doing so.”

“That’s not unique. I come from a whole other universe and the same thing happens.”

“What do you do about it there?”

“Mostly give rich people everything they want and then claim that we didn’t.”

“How does that help?”

“It doesn’t.”

“Aren’t you rich?”

“Extremely.”

“So, you haven’t really done anything about it, then.”

“Don’t tempt me. I have this incredible urge to go back to my world and fix all the problems. I have wealth and power enough to reshape my home planet’s entire civilisation.”

“Then, why don’t you?”

“I’ve been watching you for years, and you’re a good leader. I am not. I have more power than any one person should, but not the knowledge, experience and wisdom to use it well. If I start instituting simple solutions to complex problems, I’ll do more harm than good. But I can’t just do nothing with it, either. When I act it has to be with caution. I need to rely on those with the knowledge and experience I lack. People like you. Even then, I’m going to stumble, and I won’t be the one suffering from unintended consequences.”

He sighed.

“I don’t know why you even asked me that. I’m not saying anything you don’t know. You’re a capable and experienced leader, where I’m just some guy who stumbled into vast cosmic power.”

“That is exactly why. I lead my people, but you are the power looming over us all. Our autonomy exists only so long as you allow it. You saved my people and built our home, but you could equally bring it all down on top of us.”

Jason frowned.

“I understand,” he told her. “I don’t like this power dynamic either. I preferred it when I could swan around, making jokes that no one understood but me. Now, I have to be careful with every word.”

Lorenn nodded.

“Such is the nature of leadership and the danger of power. I will confess to not liking the fate of my people being in the hands of an outsider. I find it easier to think of you as a god.”

“I’m not a god.”

“For practical purposes, you are. You have unassailable power. A domain upon which even gods cannot trespass. Gods that treat you more like one of them than one of us. When I think of you as a divine authority, rather than a person, it becomes easier to accept your role in our lives. But, as you say, you are not a god. It comforts me that you understand your power over us is not to be used lightly.”

“It doesn’t comfort me. I feel like a child who ate a spirit coin and could wreck anything they touch with their carelessness. All I can do is try to avoid doing too much damage while I learn about how to use my power — and how to not use it. If you are willing, I’m hoping that you and I could speak on this topic from time to time. I could learn a lot about leadership from you.”

“I am open to that.”

“Thank you. Now, speaking of leadership, let’s get back to specifics. I imagine there is some resentment amongst your own people at the exclusion of temples from the main city.”

“Yes. We did have priests and temples in the old city. They fell defending it, shielding the rest of us as we evacuated. We honour those memories. Many would like to join those churches, but the temples are in the part of the city built for outsiders. It is an obstacle for many, and excluding the Church of Fertility is especially contentious. We were brought to the brink of extinction, and they are vital to rebuilding our population. Many consider it disrespectful to keep them at a distance.”

Jason nodded.

“Now that the other claims on my spiritual attention have been completed, I can make some changes here. If I withdraw my dominion over certain parts of the city, the gods can claim them and temples may be built. Decide which temples you want built and where, and I’ll make it possible.”

“We’ll need to negotiate with the churches.”

“It’s your city, so I shall leave that in your hands. Let me know when you’ve made your decisions.”

“And if you don’t like my decisions?”

“It’s your city,” Jason said again. “It will take more than me disagreeing with you to intervene. I’m not saying I wouldn’t step in, but that would be an extreme measure. Anything that drastic is likely as repugnant to you as to me, like wanting to build a temple of Undeath.”

Lorenna scowled.

“Repugnant indeed. I would like some measure of where you see the line, however. There is no escaping the fact that you are the ultimate authority here.”

Jason nodded, staying silent for a moment as he thought about it.

“Here’s an example,” he said. “I detest slavery. That’s far from a unique position when even the meagrest scrap of empathy or decency will get you there. It’s a core value from the society I was raised in, and one that didn’t waver for me when so many others did. Many societies on the surface use an indenture system that is little more than slavery with a coat of paint. Rife with corruption and abuse and absent of consequence. The usual exploitation of the powerless. If your ruling council wanted to institute that system here, I would argue against it, repeatedly and loudly. I would not, however, stop you. It is not for me to tell your people how to conduct themselves. To a point.”

“At what point would you intervene, then?”

“If you implemented that system, it could easily devolve to a point that I can no longer tolerate the abuses. I could see myself stepping in, even knowing that doing so would have unintentional knock-on effects. If I judged that my intervention was worth the damage it would cause, I would act. But that would be a last resort, after failing to convince your leadership to shift course on their own.”

Lorenna leaned back into the couch.

“I can’t say I like the fact that you can come in and just change things, consequences be damned. But your reluctance to do so is more than I would expect for someone in your position.”

Jason nodded.

“Power and ideals are a volatile mix. I’ve managed to temper the latter as I’ve acquired the former. Hopefully to the stage where I’m not a complete disaster. I can’t promise that I won’t make mistakes, though. If anything, I can almost promise I will.”

“I think that we are discussing worst-case scenarios here,” Lorenna said. “You and I seem to share more values than we conflict upon. I don’t think that we can progress any

further on that at this time, so let's table that discussion and move back to practical concerns."

"Certainly. Please continue."

"There is a matter that is less urgent than temple locations, and perhaps affects you more than me."

"Oh?"

"There are priests staying in Outer Rexion."

"I would expect as much, given the temples there."

"It would be more correct to say that these are former priests. They are not here for the temples, but for you. They have been petitioning for residency in the main city. Thus far, we have refused them."

"They're here for me?"

"They came here because our city is a manifestation of your power. That isn't something we tell people, but more than enough know for it to be called a secret."

"What is their interest in my... wait. How much do you know about these people?"

"That they claim you saved them. That they have spent two decades researching you, because you spent most of that time dead or in other dimensions."

Jason groaned and ran a hand over his face.

"I think I know who they are," he said.

"What is their interest in you?"

"Centuries ago, there was a conflict. A cult to one of the great astral beings had a schism. A faction broke away, more interested in power and politics than the ideals they claimed to still follow. Common in the history of my planet, but we don't have gods stepping in to intervene."

"Are these people from that cult?"

"No. This splinter group overstepped and ended up being hunted down by a bunch of churches. A lot of people from those churches were trapped and held in stasis for centuries. I released them around twenty years ago now, but many didn't have anyone to go back to. Some had descendents, and others went back to their churches. But some gave up on their faith after their ordeal, or weren't accepted back. Purity rejected all of them, probably because the real Purity had been replaced during their entrapment. You heard about the events surrounding the god of Purity?"

"I did."

"My guess would be that these people are former priests, looking for something to follow. I'm mysterious enough that they don't realise how bad an idea it is to pick me."

“So, they’re priests of you?”

“No!”

“If I understand it correctly, this city is a temple to you.”

“No. I mean, kind of, yeah. But no.”

“Well, I’m going to leave them to you regardless.”

“Oh, thank you. I can’t wait to deal with that.”

“I can have them brought to the city immediately.”

“No. I’ll go to them, once I have an avatar that can leave my domains. And there’s one more thing we need to discuss.”

“Oh?”

“The old city had an astral space. The new one does as well, but I have kept it sealed.”

“Why?”

“When I formed the city, the interior of the astral space was, for some reason, outside of my control. Or, more precisely, it was too delicate. It was in an embryonic state, not reaching completion until much later. I didn’t understand why until I realised it was waiting for me to complete the transformation of my realm.”

“Embryonic?”

“Yes.”

“Suggesting something was gestating in there. Waiting to be born.”

“Yes.”

“Something you aren’t happy to tell me about.”

“It’s going to be complicated for you politically, should word get out. But this is your home and you deserve to know, so I’m going to show you.”

Jason floated through the air so high he was practically orbital. Lorenn was beside him and they were both shrouded in an orb of invisible mist. The planet below was utterly unlike Earth, equal parts beautiful and apocalyptic. Elemental forces so vast they could be seen from space clashed upon the surface. Hurricanes crashed into supervolcanoes. Earthquakes carved canyons so massive that they became seas as tidal waves filled them. It was gorgeous, wild destruction.

“I don’t even know how to understand what I’m looking at,” Lorenn said. “The sheer scale of it. I lived my life in a cave system even low-rankers could travel through in a day.”

“This the largest astral space I’ve seen. And I can see how planets might be an alarming concept to someone who had never been on the surface of one.”

“Why don’t things fall off the bottom?”

“Oh, I’m not getting into that. My friends will be arriving soon. Ask Travis Noble.”

“The astral space in our city wasn’t this large. Not even a fraction of this.”

“That’s one of the reasons it took so long to resolve itself. The other is the bit you aren’t going to like.”

“And what is that?”

The invisible sphere shot around the planet, chasing the sun. A shape crested the horizon as they moved, resolving itself into an impossibly tall tree, kilometres high.

“That is like the tree in the transformation zone,” Lorenn said.

“Yes. And more will grow here, in time. This is a messenger birthing planet, and the messengers that it births here are of the elemental type. It had been producing them for a few years now.”

Lorenn wheeled on Jason.

“Elemental messengers?”

“I understand your concern,” Jason said, then shook his head. “No, of course I don’t understand. But I comprehend why you and your people would feel only hatred for them. The end of your civilisation began with elemental messengers. You naturally and obviously don’t want them in your city, so I sealed this place away.”

“You should destroy them.”

“They’re children, Council Leader. And they aren’t the ones that destroyed your city. They aren’t corrupted and mindless. I’m only showing you this place because the aperture to this realm is in your city. I don’t see a reason for your people to ever interact with it, but I’m not foolish enough to assume it will never happen. I wanted you to know so you weren’t blindsided should its existence ever become public.”

Lorenn stared out at the planet below and the towering tree.

“I will need time to come to terms with this, Asano.”

“Of course. I’ll take you home.”