

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.”