

## Chapter 571

### I Love a Hypocrite

Belinda's escape from the Order of the Redeeming Light's stronghold, leaving a dock full of ruined submarines in her wake, was not made alone. Her companion was neither the one she hoped for nor intended, but she knew full well that no plan went perfectly.

The need for improvisation had started back when she found Gibson Amouz. Ideally, she would have extricated him to avoid his becoming collateral damage or a hostage when the Adventure Society breached the stronghold. After finding him caught up in a complicated ritual she would not risk interrupting, she was forced to leave him for the Adventure Society forces to rescue.

She had been midway through sabotaging the stronghold defence infrastructure when she had encountered the imprisoned Amouz. After she left him, she had to visit several more of the formerly secure rooms, their security doors now blasted off, before the protections dropped. Whatever infrastructure specialist had designed the place might have been poor on anti-tampering, but they were big on redundancy.

After completing the final sabotage sequence, the defences started to wind down as the magic fuelling them was interrupted. Belinda set up the aura beacon on a delay, which she hoped would draw the order members to it while she made good her escape. If she got too caught up avoiding the order, she would have to find a hiding spot and wait for the Adventure Society to arrive. If that happened, they would be taking a dim view of her stealing things, which wouldn't impact what she'd already picked up wandering around. Unfortunately, a submersible wouldn't fit in her dimensional storage space.

By the time Belinda was making her way to the dock, the order had become active throughout the complex. They had dealt with many of the locked doors and traps she had left behind and were becoming harder to dodge. More and more she was slowing down to duck into rooms or storage spaces as enemies passed her by. She was still disguised as one of them, but the woman she was disguised as was a known follower. It wouldn't help Belinda's escape if she was recruited into the search for herself. On the upside, she came across more than a few things worth slipping into her storage space.

In the course of her escape, Belinda realised that the order had jumped to conclusions about the cause of their current troubles. The turncoat adventurers that had been secretly working for the order had helped them escape the mining facility and, having revealed themselves, joined the order in their stronghold. It was an understandable but

incorrect assumption that they were the ones responsible for the sabotage that took place shortly after their arrival.

Belinda realised this was happening when she found a group of order members attacking the now-former adventurers. The silver-rank combat was typically destructive and she needed to find a way past the rolling battle. With a good number of doors still locked down, she picked one and cracked it open with her intrusion tools, locking it again behind her. Inside was a short tunnel, leading to a trap door that was also locked.

“Potentially promising.”

It took only moments to crack the lock on the hatch, revealing a spiral staircase leading down. At the bottom was yet another locked door, to another short tunnel and yet another locked door.

“I think I’m going to find something special in here.”

In the process of going through each lock, she realised that they weren’t integrated into the wider infrastructure of the facility. The doors weren’t as secure as the ones Belinda had needed to blow up but they were designed to remain permanently secured, and not just sealed during a lockdown.

With each lock that capitulated to the ministrations of her intrusion tools, Belinda’s anticipation for whatever was waiting at the end grew. When she opened the final door, what she found inside was startling.

“What in the sweet gods is happening here?”

At first glance, she thought she had found another prisoner, in a torture chamber. It only took a moment to realise something entirely different was going on.

She moved close to the man chained upright in a freestanding metal rack. He looked at her with wild eyes, unable to speak through the gag strapped over his mouth. Like the chains suspending him in a spreadeagle vertical position, the metal ball the gag used to fill his mouth was made of hardened and enchanted materials that even a silver-ranker apparently couldn’t break through, although his rank was an assumption. She couldn’t sense his aura with the suppression collar around his neck.

Belinda looked around the room, finding it was a very strange fit for the complex around it. Instead of the clean, minimalist stone, typical for the Church of Purity, this was opulent and luxurious, with rich wall treatments, thick carpeting and indulgent layers of pillows and soft blankets in lieu of furniture.

Belinda turned her attention back to the man standing in the vertical prison rack. Looking closer, the wrist and ankle shackles were cushioned, with padding, as was the suppression collar.

"I've built some setups like this myself," she told the man. "Lucrative stuff. They have this place back in my hometown they call The Fortress. Did Jason ever take you, Shade?"

"No," Shade's voice came from Belinda's shadow. "While Mr Asano's proclivities are certainly unconventional, they are less... spanking-related."

"Yeah, it doesn't seem like his flavour of strange," she agreed, turning back the trapped man.

"It's something of a playground for the rich and powerful," she explained to him as she continued to look around the room. "People with the kind of appetites that are best kept discreet in proper society. I was surprised by how common it was for those with what was effectively absolute power to fantasise about being powerless. Never truly powerless, though; they always leave themselves an out. A method of control. Which makes me wonder how you ended up in here, strung up naked and all alone."

She looked around again, taking particular notice of the thick carpeting.

"It looks like someone shuffled out of here quickly," she mused, then looked up at the chained man with a grin.

"Oh dear," she said. "You've been playing games with those people you converted, haven't you? Their independent thinking stripped away and replaced with obedience. You probably gave them instructions on how you like your jollies with you and when to let you out after. You'd have had some kind of signal to make them release you, too, but something went wrong, didn't it?"

She laughed as realisation struck.

"The lockdown," she said. "Your mindless victims are under standing orders to mobilise if a lockdown happens, aren't they? They must have shuffled off immediately and not seen whatever gesture you use to make them let you out."

She looked at the man's face as he stared daggers at her and she laughed again.

"Oh, I'm exactly right."

She took another glance around the room as she took a bottle of soporific poison from her storage space.

"Are you sure you're a Church of Purity guy? I love a hypocrite as much as the next girl with a history of blackmail, but this is a lot."

\*\*\*

The dock had been in chaos, which was useful to Belinda. Her original plan had been to purloin one of the submersibles, but with the order members leaderless and in chaos, she revised her ambitions. The order members on the dock had split into two factions, arguing over taking the submersibles and evacuating immediately. The members whose

cell leaders never came back from the mining complex wanted to leave, while Marika and Elise' people did not.

As a compromise, they had the neutral and obedient pure converted prepping the vessels for departure, loading in supplies and the most valuable resources quickly available from the dock area. This gave Belinda a chance to shapeshift into a pure converted, mimicking their blank auras as she slipped into each of the vessels, pretending to load goods while really performing sabotage. The hauler submersible, loaded with materials from the mining complex, was a pleasant surprise. Designed to be largely self-operating, she figured out how to delay-trigger it to block off the underwater passage and cover her escape.

Only the submarine she intended to steal went unsabotaged, and she did load something onto it. It was an unconscious man, wrapped up in a very nice blanket and stowed in a crate.

Belinda's greatest stroke of luck came when she finally took off in one of the submersibles. Rather than quickly react to her, the two sides started blaming each other, buying her valuable time to get away.

Belinda had never driven a submersible before, but that proved not to be a problem. She possessed various abilities that allowed her to gain expertise akin to that of a skill book, only temporarily, in various fields. Her Instant Adept ability offered some ranged and agility-based attack options but was the least combat-oriented of that power subset. Its true worth was utility, allowing her to pilot the vessel to an adequate degree and escape from the facility.

\*\*\*

"...and that, Clive, is how I got you one of their submersibles," Belinda finished.

Clive looked out from one of the balconies of the looming temple to look over the lagoon.

"Where is it, then?" he asked.

"I stashed it, obviously. I don't want the Adventure Society saying it's theirs, just because I was on a contract. I stole it fair and square."

Humphrey gave her a disapproving look. Jason's team, minus the still-comatose Jason himself, were gathered on a large terrace balcony of Jason's cloud temple. With them were Rufus and his team, plus Taika and Travis. With everything that had gone on, they were all looking to hunker down, at least until Jason woke up.

“I’m kidding, obviously,” Belinda assured Humphrey. “The submersible sank. I forget where, so there’s no point bothering to look for it and I’m definitely not going to sell it to Clive.”

“Sell?” Clive asked.

Humphrey gave his head an exasperated shake.

“I’m just glad you caught their priest,” Neil said. “Handing him over got them off our back about your mother, Sophie.”

“For now,” Rufus said.

“Perhaps we should try questioning her?” Neil asked. “She’ll probably talk to you, Sophie.”

“Will the cloud house even let us?” Gary asked. “We aren’t even certain where it’s holding her.”

They had mapped out the new configuration of the cloud construct building and found large sections to which they had no access.

“Are we still calling it a house?” Neil asked. “It’s more of... I don’t know, a lair, maybe? That’s what you call where the villain lives, right?”

“He’s not a villain,” Humphrey insisted.

“He may not have turned the cloud house into the shape of his own head,” Travis said, “but you have to admit Jason has a lot of evil warlock vibes when he gets serious. Taika, you remember when he killed those superheroes with his mind on television? He just looked at them and they died.”

“That was pretty chilling, bro.”

“They were enemies,” Farrah said.

“I’m not saying they weren’t,” Travis said. “But a lot of people in my world are scared of him. I mean, a lot think he’s awesome, all dark powers and mystery, and most people probably think he’s a hero. / think he’s a hero. But he’s scary. When you’ve seen him fight armies of monsters and kill people – powerful people – just by looking at them, then even when he’s being friendly, he’s scary. Especially if he’s friendly while you point a gun at him and he’s telling you he’s going to steal the most powerful weapon on the planet. I’m just saying.”

“His essences are fairly sinister,” Neil said. “Blood, dark, sin and doom? His combination sounds like the Adventure Society should hunt him down.”

“That’s hardly a fresh observation,” Rufus said. “His combination is fine. We checked.”

“That’s the thing though, isn’t it?” Neil said. “I bet you took one look at what he had on hand and rushed to check.”

“That’s true; we did,” Gary admitted. “Most people go their whole lives without stumbling onto an essence and he found three within a few hours of arriving in our world.”

“That’s just because he’s an outworlder,” Rufus said. “They’re all like that.”

“And do all the outworlders get the drinking-baby-blood combination?” Neil asked.

“It doesn’t matter what his powers are,” Dawn said, entering through the door to join them on the large balcony terrace. “It matters what he does with them.”

Everyone pulled themselves up a little straighter in the presence of the diamond-ranker except Farrah and Humphrey. Farrah had spent months travelling with Jason and Dawn, while Humphrey had been standing straight in the first place.

“The time is drawing close for me to leave this world,” Dawn announced. “Any action I take has the potential of giving the Builder excuses to push the rules yet again.”

“You’re leaving before Jason recovers?” Farrah asked.

“No,” Dawn said. “Jason has made the inevitable spectacle of himself, to a greater degree than even I envisaged. At least until he wakes. I shall reside here in the cloud temple.”

“Temple?” Humphrey said. “That is a very loaded term.”

“Yet it is the one being used in the high-ranking circles, where it matters. It is also not inaccurate.”

“Great, Jason made a temple to himself,” Neil said. “You’d think I’d be surprised, but here we are. How big a mess are we in, now?”

“You will all be the focus of powerful forces now,” Dawn said. “My presence alongside you will exacerbate the attention you garner, but there is little point closing the gate once the heidel has already run off. That is an easy trade for the pressure it will shield you from. My presence will make the local powers restrict themselves to putting their eyes on you and not their hands.”

“How long do you think that will work?” Rufus asked.

“Jason will likely be in recovery through the rest of the monster surge and the Builder’s departure,” Dawn said. “I recommend you petition the Adventure Society to allow your team to decamp from Rimaros as soon as Jason is fit to travel. I have a very strong feeling they’ll say yes, and you would do well to put some distance between yourselves and the Sea of Storms for a while. Once Jason can turn the cloud temple into a vehicle, I will be strongly advising him to do exactly that and make use of it.”

“When you go,” Farrah asked, “will we see you again?”

“Yes,” Dawn said, “but not for some years. We need to talk about that before Jason wakes up.”

## Chapter 572

### I've Told You Everything

"I'm about to ask you to do something," Dawn said. "Before I do, I'm going to need some of you to leave. Clive, Taika and Travis. Rufus, Farrah and Gary. You can't be here for this and I need you to not ask why."

Clive looked at Dawn for only a moment before nodding, grabbing Travis by the sleeve and leading him from the room. Farrah and Dawn shared a look, Farrah reluctant but finally nodding as well, following the others from the terrace.

"What do you think that's about?" Travis asked, slowing down as the door to the balcony terrace closed behind them.

"If Dawn says we aren't meant to know, then we aren't meant to know," Clive said. "We aren't going to talk about it and you should do your best to distract yourself so you aren't wondering about it."

"Done," Gary said. "We should start getting lunch ready."

"We still have some of that argy fruit jam Jason made," Taika said. "I can go get some scones from the bakery. Most of the people hanging about have gotten bored and left, so it shouldn't be too crowded."

"Let me get the scones while you whip the cream," Gary said. "I always end up with cream in my fur."

"Bro, what did I tell you about licking the bowl? Use a scraper, not your face."

"What's wrong with my face?" Gary asked. "People love my face."

"It's pretty big though. Huge face, small bowl. It's not tricky to see where you're going wrong."

Gary and Taika noticed Travis looking at them, wide-eyed.

"What?" Gary asked.

"Bro, it's obvious," Taika told him.

"Oh, right," Gary said, realising his mistake. "Don't worry; it won't just be sweet scones. I'll get savoury scones, too."

"How are we talking about scones right now?" Travis asked, incredulous.

"Oh," Farrah said, having her own realisation. "You're American. You're getting biscuits and scones mixed up again."

"You think *that's* the problem?" Travis asked, then pointed at the closed door to the terrace, the black cloud-stuff completely sealing off any sound. "Whatever they're talking about in there is really important. Like, fate of the world stuff."



“Bro, if you’re waiting for things to calm down before eating good food, you’re in the wrong social circle.”

“I’m going into the village with Gary,” Rufus said. “I want some of that butter Mrs Marsh makes for the savoury scones.”

Farrah put a reassuring hand on Travis’ shoulder.

“Remember where we met, Travis?”

His shoulders slumped and Farrah gave one of them a consoling pat as he answered her.

“On an army base under attack by vampires while you were stealing a nuclear weapon.”

“Exactly. You can’t drop everything just because there’s a dinosaur invasion or a zombie army or a hole in the side of the universe.”

“Or a bunch of world-shaping doom golems,” Clive added.

“Travis, you know how Jason got in those last days on Earth,” Farrah said. “That’s what happens when you obsess over the job. You have to learn to let go of the things you can’t do anything about, and sometimes even the ones you can. Otherwise, it’ll hollow you out and you can’t help anyone.”

\*\*\*

Back on the terrace, Dawn looked at the remainder of Jason’s team.

“What I have to ask of you is not fair,” she said. “And it requires trust I have no way to demonstrate is well-founded. I need to tell you what I need and I need you to not ask questions, or respond at all. Do you understand?”

The team showed various levels of confusion and dissatisfaction, but they all nodded silently.

“Thank you. I am going to leave this world, some time shortly after Jason awakes. The next time you see me again, you need to do what I say no questions, no hesitation. No matter who you have to leave behind. You have to get Clive to move with you, along with any other allies you have on hand that you completely trust. Until then, you can’t tell Clive or Jason or even discuss it amongst yourselves. I can’t tell you why and I can’t tell you why I can’t tell you why. I need you to accept it, never talk about it after you leave this room and do your best not to dwell on it at all.”

There was a long moment of silence before someone spoke.

“That’s... pretty uninformative,” Neil said.

“You said ‘no matter who we have to leave behind,’” Humphrey said. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“You’ll like it even less when the time comes,” Dawn said. “But you have to do it.”

“But you can’t tell us why,” Sophie said.

“That’s right,” Dawn said. “It’s a risk even telling you this much, but I want you to be as prepared as you can be.”

“How do we prepare for something we know nothing about?” Humphrey asked.

“You get stronger. When the time comes, if you aren’t gold-rank, your chances go from small to none.”

“Chances at what?” Belinda asked.

“At something you will attempt regardless of what I say here,” Dawn said. “There is only a very slender opening for even the potential of success, and I am trying to help you thread that needle.”

“How long do we have to get ready?” Humphrey asked.

“More than a decade. Less than two.”

“That’s feasible,” Humphrey said. “Not easy, but with sufficient dedication, it can be done. It doesn’t leave time for other pursuits.”

“No,” Dawn said. “You need to be adventurers, and only adventurers.”

“What do we tell Jason and Clive? They won’t go more than ten years without noticing us push.”

“Tell them it’s something you need them to do and you can’t tell them why. It’s an unpleasant task, I can assure you, but a necessary one. They trust you and will go along.”

“Why?” Neil asked. “I know you said not to ask, but what does the World-Phoenix get out of this?”

“The World-Phoenix has an interest in Jason Asano because he is helping its agenda. That interest has protected Asano from other forces that would otherwise involve themselves with him. His lack of power, relative to the scope of events he has become a reluctant participant in, make him a valuable game piece. The moment the World-Phoenix is done with him, that protection ends. That’s when you’ll see me again, acting not on behalf of the World-Phoenix but myself. At that moment, you will need to be gold-rank or you won’t qualify to even try and help him. Diamond-rank would be better, but gold will at least allow you to set foot on the path.”

Dawn frowned.

“I’ve already said more than I intended. Every word I share with you is a danger. I’m going to go, but I hope you forget what I’ve told you today.”

“You haven’t told us anything,” Sophie said.

“I’ve told you everything,” Dawn said. “That’s why you cannot share any of this, especially with Clive and Jason. They will likely see through my evasions and bring disaster. Do *not* speak of this with Clive. Don’t even tell Jason this discussion took place. I’ll say again: do not even discuss this with each other. Do your best to not dwell on what I’ve told you at all and focus on growing stronger.”

Dawn didn’t even bother to use the door, leaving via the balcony as flaming wings appeared on her back before she shot away through the air.

Belinda wandered over to the balcony and looked out, the diamond-ranker already gone.

“What in the sweet teats of the Lizard goddess was that about?”

\*\*\*

“No,” Jason said, in the feeble voice of an old man. “The clown is the bad guy.”

Gordon’s orbs flickered in a rapid, blue and orange strobe, gently pulsing both aura and light. Jason wasn’t sure if he could understand it because his language ability had undergone a second evolution or if his bond with Gordon was stronger, but he didn’t especially care. The answer would be somewhere in the slate of system messages waiting for him when he had woken up. He’d immediately pushed them aside, more interested in seeing his familiars who had immediately emerged in his waking.

He had tried to will the cloud house to turn his bed into a reclining chair, but the moment he attempted to circulate mana in his body it was wracked with pain. He was left lying in the cloud bed, his head sticking out like he was in a bubble bath, except all the bubbles were black. Shade and Gordon floated over him while Colin’s blood-clone form sat on the edge of the bed.

Colin had let out a nails-on-a-chalkboard alien screech.

“I know you have been, buddy,” Jason told him, feebly patting the familiar’s arm. “You’re always a good boy.”

Gordon had started flickering his orbs in the strange light-aura code language, wanting to encourage Jason with his favourite movie.

“Still with this?” Jason asked. “The clown is not the hero. He’s an interdimensional entity that eats people.”

He looked at Colin and Gordon.

“I’m talking to the wrong people about this. Shade, back me up on this.”

“I haven’t seen the film,” Shade said. “Is Ralph Fiennes in it?”

“No,” Jason said.

"That's a shame," Shade said. "I like Ralph Fiennes. It always feels like he's playing a butler, even when he isn't."

"Of course he does," Jason said. "What's his actual last name again?"

"Twisleton-Wykeham-Fiennes," Shade said. "I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"Does that family line have its own Wikipedia page for being excessively British?"

"It is not for being excessively British," Shade said. "It may be true that they adopted the name through an Act of Parliament, but that is hardly the point. More importantly, were you going through my browser history?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Jason said.

He gently moved his head to look around the room. It was a plain black cube with a plain black bed in it.

The cloud house had taken on darker iterations before and Jason could replace the white with a black motif offset by bright blue and orange. He generally preferred the pastel sunset colours, however. This new monochrome black was not to his taste, but if a chair gave him trouble, he wasn't about to try and reshape the whole house.

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "You have some rather anxious visitors. Shall I open the door?"

"I don't know if I'm up to that," Jason said. "I'm not feeling so—"

"Gary has scones."

"Well, of course, they can come in. Wait, am I naked?"

\*\*\*

"...and then the submersible mysteriously sank and I have no idea what happened to it," Belinda explained.

"It mysteriously sank?" Jason asked.

"Yes," Belinda confirmed conspicuously jerking her head in Humphrey's direction. "I definitely only used it as an escape vessel and did not stash it away to sell to Clive."

"I just said I was interested in taking a look," Clive said. "I am not buying a stolen submarine."

"Good, because I definitely don't have one," Belinda said.

"I'm sorry I was too laid up to come help with the Purity stronghold."

"Yeah," Neil said. "We're off doing all the work while you're spending the whole week taking a nap. Talk about lazy." Jason's chuckle quickly turned into a pained grunt.

"Ow. Not loving the whole pathetically feeble situation I have going on here."

"My mother and Carlos Quilido will be here in not too long," Rufus said.

"Carlos is in town? Liara called him in? It's nice when people in power actually listen to your suggestions."

"Perhaps the trick is for your suggestions to be something other than shoving things into places they do not want those things shoved," Humphrey pointed out.

"There's probably something in that."

"They aren't here now because all that can help you at this point is rest," Neil said.

"They and the rest of a full Church of the Healer contingent are working on Gibson Amouz."

"You got him out alive then?" Jason asked. "But worse for wear, from the sounds of it. Did the bad guys do their creepy purification thing on him?"

"They were in the process when we found him," Clive said. "An early stage, so far as anyone can tell. That ritual they were using was fiendishly complex. Just figuring out how to stop it without killing him immediately was no small challenge."

"How long did it take him?" Jason asked.

"Nine minutes," Sophie said.

"So you say," Neil said bitterly. "I still think it was ten, but it was your boyfriend checking the watch."

"Lost a bet?" Jason asked.

Neil grumbled instead of giving a response.

"I will not have my integrity impugned," Humphrey said.

"Was that even your watch?" Neil asked. "That didn't look like your watch."

"No," Humphrey said. "Sophie gave me one she got from Beli—"

Sophie's hand clamped over Humphrey's mouth.

"It was a perfectly normal watch," she said.

## Chapter 573

### Faith is Soul-Deep

“Everyone out,” Arabelle said, ushering the team from Jason’s room as Carlos approached the cloud bed.

“Good to see you,” Jason told him.

“I heard it was Princess Liara’s idea to call me in,” Carlos told him. “That was good thinking. I’ve been aware of the Order of Redeeming Light’s methods for a while, and those of us in my specialty field have always had some questions. When the Church of Purity was still in good standing, we never had a chance to explore them.”

“How is the Amouz kid?”

“About forty years old, to start,” Carlos said. “Not sure how that qualifies as a kid to you.”

“Right now I feel about three hundred. What exactly is wrong with me?”

“Neil didn’t tell you?” Arabelle asked.

“It was more of a friendly catch-up,” Jason said. “Also, there were baked goods. You don’t want someone explaining gross medical stuff while they have a dollop of cream on their nose. If I’ve been in a coma for days without healing up, I’m guessing recovery will give me more than enough time for the ugly details.”

“I’ll examine you as we explain,” Arabelle said. “Carlos, would you lift him up to rest atop the cloud bed instead of inside it?”

“Now, hold on,” Jason said. “I’m in the nicky-noo. You lift me on top of the bed and the fruit bowl will be on full display.”

Nestled in the cloud bed like a bubble bath, the only thing Jason wore was his necklace with his magic amulet and the cloud flask attached to it.

“It’s nothing I haven’t seen before,” Arabelle said. “Who do you think got rid of what was left of your clothes?”

“Humphrey?”

Carlos snorted a laugh as he plunged his arms into the cloud bed and under Jason, gently raising him up.

Arabelle started moving a wand back and forth over Jason’s body. Carlos and Arabelle watched closely as the wand’s crystal tip shifted between several colours while throwing up illusory symbols that floated in the air briefly before vanishing. Carlos took out a notebook and pencil, recording the symbols.

"You're a lucky man, Jason," Carlos said as he continued taking notes. "You had your familiar and Mr Standish draining your mana, with your cloud house siphoning some away as well. Your leech familiar helped keep your body from breaking down while your... whatever the glowing one is, initiated a final purge that managed to save you at the very last minute. The only reason you survived that last ritual was swift thinking on the part of your team's healer. Only his well-timed use of a non-healing ability allowed you to endure it. Even all of that wouldn't have worked for anyone else. The last thing that managed to hold you together was your extremely unusual nature."

"The physical-spiritual gestalt thing?" Jason asked.

"Yes," Arabelle said. "That was your true saviour. If your body and soul were still in a binary state, the degradation of your body's magical matrix would have been much more severe. Because your soul and your body – or more precisely, your body's magical matrix – are now the same thing, the integrity of your body's magical matrix is breathtakingly robust."

"It should be indestructible," Carlos said. "The meat you're made up of is the only real vulnerability you have. The fact that you managed to damage your magical matrix when it's an extension of your soul is... Jason, I can't even begin to explain the magnitude to which you underestimated how destructive what you did to yourself was. Using whatever that power source was is one thing, but what you used it *for*? A half-finished power enhancer that you don't fully understand? You should be a puddle on the floor of a room in a mine buried under the ocean."

"It was that bad?"

"Jason, the magical matrix of your body and your soul are the same thing, and the soul is inviolable. You can hurt a soul; scrape around the outside and cause excruciating torment, as you know. But unless the will caves in, you cannot violate it to cause any genuine damage. You may well understand this on a deeper level than anyone else on this planet."

"Your body matrix is the magical framework your body is slung over," Arabelle said. "Like a skeleton that doesn't exist, but you'll die if it isn't there."

"Your body is mostly the same as anyone else's," Carlos added. "It's very hard to damage anyone's magical matrix, but yours should be utterly impervious to harm unless you open yourself up to damage."

"Which is exactly what you did when you tried to use whatever half-finished modification you and Clive did to your cloud flask," Arabelle continued. "Jason, destroying

your body is easy, but doing the same to your body matrix is essentially impossible. Please stop doing impossible things.”

Jason winced.

“Is that the tone you use when Rufus has been a naughty boy?”

“Jason,” Carlos said, while Arabelle scowled, pausing the back and forth motion of the wand. “Do you remember how I used what I learned from what happened to you to study the effects of star seeds, so we could improve our methods of dealing with them?”

“Sure. Did it actually help?”

“It did. And I’d like to—”

“That’s enough, Carlos,” Arabelle chided. “Let’s make sure he’s genuinely in recovery before we start turning him into an experiment.”

“Wait, what experiment?” Jason asked. “I think I’d be more comfortable if someone pushed me back down into the bed now, please.”

\*\*\*

Jason had managed, very, very gently, to slowly shift the cloud bed into a heavily reclined chair. Moving mana through his body for any magical task was painful. There was always a level of pain from the mana naturally circulating through any magical body, but any time he actively used it the pain massively spiked.

After thoroughly examining him, Arabelle and Carlos concluded that Jason should use his mana to the greatest degree he could tolerate. Wherever mana was actively circulating through his body matrix, they saw a marginal but detectable acceleration in his recovery rate.

Having completed their examination, Arabelle left. Both healers had more than enough on their plate and hovering over Jason was not productive. Arabelle especially was a mental health specialist and Jason did not seem excessively troubled on that front. Compared to when she had first arrived in Rimaros, the crippled Jason was much healthier, from her perspective, than the powerhouse adventurer fresh from a domineering victory over the Builder’s forces.

Carlos did not leave with her, having something to discuss with Jason. Jason gritted his teeth through the pain as he slowly had the cloud house start forming a chair for Carlos. Partway through he gave up on a full chair and went with a small stool instead.

“That’s good,” Carlos said as he sat down. “Push things when you can, but don’t let yourself get down about things not going faster. We – meaning students of healing magic – have a very limited understanding of how someone like you works. That’s why I’d like to



work with you through recovery, the way I did after the star seed. To see what I can learn that might help us.”

“This is about the messengers, isn’t it?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Carlos said. “The Adventure Society is actively suppressing the news, but it turns out that the grand summoning your team interrupted was just one of many. Your team weren’t even the only ones to interrupt one. But the Church of Purity had many more people than anyone realised. They have hidden pockets of worshippers across the world and the messenger forces they managed to summon are not inconsiderable. Until the monster surge is over, authorities are actively hiding this fact.”

“That’s a little different to before,” Jason said. “Studying the star seed was to help people recover after they were also implanted. You’re talking about studying my body as it recovers for potential vulnerabilities. So you can better hurt people like them. And like me.”

“Not exactly,” Carlos said. “I’m a priest of the Healer and I don’t seek out pathways to cause harm. But any insights I can gain into potential vulnerabilities in the course of recovery will be greatly valued by everyone who *isn’t* a priest of the Healer.”

“You sound like a man looking for a loophole,” Jason said. “Purity worshippers have been more than a little hypocritical, working with the Builder and some of the other things they’ve been up to. Is that the example you want to follow?”

“It’s odd you should say that, given what I’ve learned during your coma. But with respect, Jason, don’t presume to tell me what my god is and is not.”

“That’s between you and your boss,” Jason acknowledged. “But I seem to recall your church having a problem with clergy going astray. He kicked out the whole greenstone roster, back in Greenstone. Neil was the only one who stood up to them, which is what made me want him for our team. He was all they had left and he’s a low-rank adventuring priest, not active clergy. They had to portal in replacements.”

“Things are not that simple, Jason.”

“They never are,” Jason said. “If I’ve learned anything over the last few years, it’s that any given thing is more complicated than I realise, and most of what I know about it is wrong. Also, I’ve learned how to kill things with magic powers. So if I’ve learned any *two* things over the last few... well, you get it.”

“I’m not unaware of the things you’re describing,” Carlos said. “But the Healer encompasses every aspect of healing. That includes a comprehensive understanding of the ways people can be broken. It isn’t the task of our church to act on it, but the gods are not wholly individual, Jason. The god of healing and the god of war are not enemies; they’re brothers.”

"I don't like the idea of those brothers working together to find better ways to kill me."

"It's not about you, Jason."

"No? Then go experiment on the next spiritual-physical gestalt bloke you come across."

"I already have."

"I'm guessing that the messengers aren't big on volunteering for 'better ways to kill them' experiments."

"They are not."

"Do you even believe anything will work, Carlos? Wasn't the whole point of this that I did this damage to myself? Is your plan to produce spirit bombs that look like fruit and start slipping them into the messengers' packed lunches? I don't see that working out."

"We don't know what will work, Jason. That's why I want to do this. The messengers are only a part of what Purity has prepared, but they seem to be the largest part and they are incredibly powerful. Very few magical beings even come close to an essence user of the same rank, but messengers do."

"They're that strong?"

"They don't have as many powers as we do, but they have a lot. And because their power is inherent, their entire population naturally becomes vastly powerful. It's the reason for their famous arrogance as a species. This entire invasion force is high-ranking. They don't have anything like the numbers our entire world can array against them, but even their rank and file are silver. They have no shortage of gold-rankers and while there aren't any confirmed diamonds yet, we believe they're either out there now or will be. We're certain that there are still mass-summoning projects we have yet to detect and have yet to be enacted. Before the monster surge is over and their window for mass-summoning closes, they will be."

Jason frowned, contemplating, but didn't say anything.

"Jason, their numbers are significant. We need every edge we can get."

"I still don't know, Carlos. You're asking me to let you study me to find the best way of killing me."

"Jason, I think there's a lot more going on here than we realise. Not just with the messengers, but the Church of Purity as a whole. I haven't discussed this with anyone yet, because of the dire ramifications, but I hope it will help you understand the importance of what's going on."

Jason didn't bother explaining that his personal scale of what constituted important was massively out of balance after preventing the astral annihilation of Earth not once but twice.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"The days you spent waking up, I spent examining the Order of Redeeming Light members. The ones who have been through what they egregiously call their purification ritual, as well as Gibson Amouz, who went through a part of it."

"How is he?"

"About where you were when you and I first met."

"Well, you helped me. I'm sure you can do the same for him."

"Thank you for the faith. But back to the topic at hand, I've also examined the people implanted with these 'purified' clockwork cores. What I'm finding across the board is disturbing on a scale so large that just the scope of it makes it seem implausible."

"You just described the last four years of my life," Jason said. "I may be the best sounding board you'll get."

Carlos looked at Jason, uncertain, before nodding to himself.

"There's something profoundly wrong with what the Order of Redeeming Light is doing, Jason. Not just morally, which is obvious, but on a deeper level. That so-called purification ritual isn't anything of the sort. I've had the chance to dig into it because of what happened to Gibson Amouz. His state, like yours, has given me a chance to gain insights that aren't possible with those who have fully gone through the process."

"And you found something even more worrying than what we already knew?"

"This purification ritual is some kind of extremely modified lesser vampire curse. Altered beyond recognition unless you really get in and look, and even then, I'm not entirely certain. I need to examine the Order of Redeeming Light members more, based on what I've learned from Amouz. I'm confident, but the changes are extreme to the point of no longer retaining any practical resemblance to vampirism. It doesn't even prevent the use of essences and it can even affect not just living things but almost anything with magic."

"Does that mean it doesn't change the soul?" Jason asked. "Lesser vampirism hijacks the entire body, but if you kill them, the soul goes free, right?"

"Yes."

"Is there a way to remove the effects without killing them?"

"I don't know. It's been a few days and I'm still working with postulation as much as anything. It will take months, probably years of research to answer that kind of question. You're missing the important point, though."

"And what's that?"

"The Order of Redeeming Light. I told you before that people in my field have always had questions about them. The reason is that they appear to have a way to forcibly convert worshippers, which shouldn't be possible. A fully converted lesser vampire will obey any order up to and including killing itself. The only exception is that you can't force them to open up their souls, because the vampirism doesn't go that deep. Faith is soul-deep as well. You can make someone pretend to worship, but they won't really do it. It'll just be performance."

"You're saying they aren't genuine worshippers of Purity? That it's an act?"

"This ritual that changes them isn't purification, but the exact opposite. It's a taint. Clearly, unambiguously and objectively a taint."

"Yeah, the god of Purity is a hypocrite. This is not news."

"Yes, Jason, it is. A god losing their way and using specious arguments to justify circumventing their own principles is one thing. Religious tales are rife with stories about this – usually about the gods of other religions. A god directly and unambiguously contravening their core identity is another thing entirely. We mortals might have rules, but gods *are* rules. They are intricately connected to the concepts they embody. They can't go directly against their central principle, no matter how much they might weasel around it."

"But you're saying that's what the god of Purity is doing."

"So it would seem."

"What does that even mean?" Jason asked, processing everything Carlos had just explained. "Are you saying that the god of Purity somehow isn't the god of Purity?"

"Yes, Jason. That's exactly what I'm saying."

## Chapter 574

### Lest He Become a Monster Himself

“You’re saying the god of Purity is pulling a Wizard of Oz?” Jason asked. He was reclined in a cloud chair while Carlos sat facing him on a cloud stool.

“I don’t know what that means,” Carlos said.

“It means there’s no actual god and it’s just some bloke in a booth.”

“No, Jason; it’s not some person in a booth.”

“It would be tricky running an entire branch of a religion on hand puppets and doing a funny voice,” Jason acknowledged. “Who’s behind the curtain then? It wasn’t the Builder the whole time, was it? That would be convoluted and counter-productive in the extreme.”

“That isn’t possible,” Carlos said.

“So? I do impossible stuff all the time. Are you saying a great astral being is worse than me? Actually, the Builder is, now that I think about it. That guy sucks.”

“Jason, you should take this seriously.”

Jason burst out laughing, which quickly turned into a pain-stricken groan.

“Nope,” he croaked.

Carlos frowned but continued.

“It has to be one of the deception gods,” he explained. “There are several of them, but the most likely candidates are Deceit and Disguise.”

“There’s a god just for disguises? That must be a pretty minor god.”

“Disguise is a minor god, but with a more comprehensive field of influence than it may seem at first. Disguise is the god pertaining to masking one thing as another. From disguises to poisoned drinks to counterfeit spirit coins, Disguise the lord of illusion, manipulating assumptions and walking unnoticed in plain sight.”

“And you think the god Disguise has disguised himself as Purity?”

“I don’t think anyone else could, except perhaps one of the other deception gods.”

“And the other gods didn’t notice this going on?”

“I told you about the interconnectedness of the gods. That Healer is brother to War.”

“That’s a metaphor, right? They don’t actually have a mum or anything, right?”

“That is correct. The gods, even those antagonistic to one another, are all part of a complex interplay. They have rules, governing not just themselves and their areas of influence but how they relate to one another. If the god of disguises chooses to take on a disguise, even Knowledge or Truth cannot reveal it.”

“But they’re Knowledge and Truth. Isn’t that their whole thing?”

“It’s complicated, as I described. Gods must be able to act within their sphere of influence without others simply negating it or it becomes a dangerous clash between the forces that govern reality. This is why the gods are bound by convoluted limitations.”

“Okay, but doesn’t that suggest that half the gods could be a scam? What if most of them don’t even exist and it’s just a small handful of them playing silly buggers? The whole pantheon could be one guy with the world’s most overelaborate puppet show.”

“There are rules that govern these things. Profoundly complicated ones. Every faith has its priests study the nuances of how the gods relate to one another. It’s extremely complicated and nuanced. Deities have limitations that don’t make sense to mortal sensibilities. What gods can do is impossible to the likes of us, but most people don’t realise that the reverse is also true. The gods are the forces that govern our reality. We have freedoms in our relative weakness that are as unattainable to them as stopping the sun from rising is impossible to us. Understanding those limitations is a field of study that people sink lifetimes into.”

“And you’ve undertaken that kind of study?”

“I’ve dabbled. Every priest has at least some grounding in it. The point is that the relationships between the gods and the ways in which they balance each other out can be difficult to decipher.”

“Is this you taking a long time to say that you have no idea what’s happening?”

“No,” Carlos said. “I think that I do know what’s happening. I just need you to understand that gods don’t relate to one another in the same ways that mortals do.”

“Sure. I’ve dealt with Knowledge a bit, and seen that she has rules about what she can and can’t tell people, even though she knows everything.”

“That’s a very pertinent example, but I’ll come back to that. The Ecumenical Council was convened by the churches to judge the behaviour of the Church of Purity once their collusion with the Cult of the Builder came to light. From there, it became increasingly clear that the church had been operating well outside their own dictates, and had been for some time.”

“You’re only talking about churches, not gods,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Carlos said. “Because of the nature of divine interaction, it is always simpler to act using mortals as proxies. This is one of the key roles of every church. But I think there is more to it than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Ecumenical Council discovered that the Purity church’s improprieties had been escalating over decades. Perhaps even centuries.”

Jason thought about the intervention in his own world, centuries in the past.

"That makes sense," he said.

"I have come to believe that one of the reasons that the churches were acting instead of the gods is that the gods had already dealt with Purity quite some time ago. You're familiar with the concept of sanctioning?"

"I know it's something transcendent beings do instead of killing. Beyond that, I have no idea."

"No one does, but that understanding is enough for this explanation. I think that the gods may have already sanctioned Purity long before you or I were even born. But some rule, like what you described about the limits on what Knowledge could share, prevented the gods from telling their clergy what happened."

"Wouldn't the Purity people notice their god was missing? Also, Purity is still around. Lots of people have seen him in person when he manifests in temple districts across the whole planet. You think it was that deception god the whole time? Disguise, right?"

"Or perhaps Deceit. Either way, for the other gods to inform their clergy or the population at large would encroach on the domain of the deception god. Therefore, they would have been unable to do so."

"And they what? Need someone like you to figure it out, because you're a mortal? You aren't bound to the same strictures and can shout it from the rooftops?"

"Exactly," Carlos said. "I'm convinced that I'm right, but I'm afraid of the ramifications. Just the Purity church being brought low was a massive upheaval. If the people realise that the gods knew that Purity was not even Purity for their entire lives, I don't know what will happen."

"And people aren't likely to respond well to an explanation that it's very complicated and nuanced. They'll start making snap judgements based on bad assumptions and whatever unscrupulous lies people tell that sound like simple answers."

"The dark gods will do very well from this, yes," Carlos said. "I do not like the idea of my actions serving the god of Discord."

"But you're a healer," Jason told him. "You know that sometimes you have to cut the bad parts away before the good parts can recover."

"Yes."

"What does the Disguise god get out of this?"

"Many gods are antagonistic to one another and fall largely into two camps. One camp is made up of gods whose temples and churches you find anywhere in the world there are people. The others are the gods whose priests dwell in the hidden places. Gods

who you pray to not because of something you want, but something you want to avoid.

Pain, Discord, Deceit.”

“And these are the ones who make out great over this.”

“Yes. Discord, in particular.”

“So, it’s all bad news.”

“Not entirely,” Carlos said. “Now that I know what has been happening, I also see what the other gods have been doing. Knowledge knows more than any of the other gods, and while she cannot share her knowledge, she has been raising forces in secret across the world, without even telling them what they are doing or why. This came to light only after people started investigating the Purity church and found Knowledge kept having her forces in the same locations. It was one of the things that helped me put the pieces together.”

“Using a loophole to drop clues,” Jason said. “All these god rules make them seem like lawyers. American lawyers.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“So, what about the actual god of Purity?” Jason asked. “I heard that if a god got sanctioned, a new one would come into being to fill the void.”

“That is my understanding as well,” Carlos said, “but now we are into the realm where historical record gives way to myth and legend. Even assuming that a new god will appear, we have no idea how long that process takes. It could be a thousand years. Ten thousand years.”

“That’s encouraging,” Jason said. “Good luck dealing with all that. I’m glad it’s none of my affair.”

“Not your affair?” Carlos asked. “The entire point of explaining all this is to show you how important it is that we do everything possible to deal with whatever this deception god has planned.”

“You means poking me with a stick while I heal up so you can find better ways to kill me.”

“To deal with the messengers, Jason.”

“They aren’t my responsibility.”

“How can you listen to everything I just said and choose to not act when there is something you can contribute?”

“Oh, I’ll contribute. As an adventurer. I’ll be happy to take any sensible contract to handle threats appropriate for silver-rankers to confront. But that’s it. I’m not going to let you help people design methods to more effectively murder me.”



“You’re a part of this, Jason. The church has come for you already.”

“Yes, I’ve been involved peripherally with the Purity church’s affairs, but I’m still on the outside of this fight. Purity – or whoever it is – may have accepted a contract hit on me, but it’s clear at this point that his peons were more interested in using me as a distraction. They don’t care about me; they’re running out the clock until the Builder leaves, paying lip service to coming after me without ever seeing it through.”

“Jason, you have what is probably the leader of the Order of Redeeming Light somewhere in this building.”

“I have my friend’s mum somewhere in this building.”

“You are in this Jason. And if you’re not, you should be. The fact that you have anything to contribute means that you have the responsibility to do so.”

Anger clouded Jason’s expression.

“Don’t talk to me about responsibility, Carlos. I’m not responsible for dealing with your gods. I’m a silver-ranker and I’ve done my part standing up to worse than gods. I’ve saved a planet. Twice. And it’ll be once more before it stops trying to crack like an egg and disintegrate into the astral.”

Jason’s voice grew stronger, anger pushing him through the pain.

“I’ve fought the Builder with a knife to stop a bunch of giant terraforming robots from wiping out a city full of people and kicking off an interdimensional invasion three years early. I’ve saved tens of thousands of lives directly, and billions, if you count the world I keep saving. My soul has looked into the infinite and been pitted against an entity of such magnitude that the mortal mind lacks the capacity to comprehend its nature, let alone, scope.”

Jason gritted his teeth, choking off a grunt of pain as he pushed himself to sit up straight to look directly at Carlos.

“I understand ramifications of what’s at play here. I understand stakes and challenges. At this stage, a rogue counterfeit god tops out at ‘not great’ on my personal threat scale and I’ll say this again: I’m a silver-ranker. Yes, I’ve been dragged into situations where I was the only one there to stand up and do the job, and I’ve bugged it up a lot. But I did it because I was the only guy who could or would. But this time, there are people who can and will. People who aren’t just some silver-ranker, and I am just some guy this time, Carlos. I’m not *the* guy, which is a refreshing change. I loved the idea of being the hero right up until I was.”

“Not being at the centre of events doesn’t abrogate your responsibility to do what you can, Jason. As hard as it is, you don’t get to shirk that responsibility.”

Jason sucked in a sharp, furious hiss of breath.

“Shirk my responsibility? I fought the Builder, Carlos. I fought him, I won, and I died doing it. And I’ve fought this order of Purity or whoever’s really behind the curtain, and I’m lying here having almost died for my trouble. You told me yourself that it should have killed me. I’m going to repeat myself one more time, Carlos, because it doesn’t seem to be sinking in: I’m a silver-ranker. Can you look me in the eye and tell me that it’s my responsibility to fight armies of angels and a global network of fanatic terrorists?”

“Yes,” Carlos said. “Because you can. If you have the power to do something that can help, you have a moral obligation to do it.”

Carlos stood as the stool he was sitting on suddenly sank into the floor. Jason’s cloud chair did the same, tipping him into a standing position.

“Jason, don’t—”

“Shut up,” Jason snarled, as he staggered, struggling to stay on his feet. He managed to stop stumbling and stand unsteadily in place, his alien eyes burning as they stared at Carlos. Jason ignored his nakedness, his body a pasty and emaciated wreckage. The scars covering his torso stood starkly prominent against his unnaturally pale skin.

“Jason you need to—”

“You think I haven’t done enough?” Jason asked, his voice tomb-quiet. “You’re accusing me of shirking my responsibilities? Ask your friend Arabelle what I’ve done. Ask Farrah. Ask your damn god; I bet he knows all about it.”

Jason’s voice was building as he talked through teeth gritted against the pain. His body was too weak to stand and he was circulating mana to stay upright, wracking his body with torment he fought through using distilled rage.

“Jason, you have a chance to contribute—”

“You think I haven’t paid enough? Do you remember how we met, Carlos? Why you’re in this room? Can you not see what’s in front of your eyes?”

Blue and orange light started gathering in the air behind Jason as blood started leaking from his eyes, still locked onto the healer. Carlos felt Jason’s aura rising but it wasn’t coming from Jason himself. It came from everywhere, like a rising tide, and Jason’s voice rose with it. His aura battered against Carlos, who struggled to fend it off even with his gold rank aura.

“Jason, you’re hurting yourself.”

“I always am. I owe you a lot for helping me when I needed it the most. But that also means you’ve seen just part of the price I’ve paid for living up to my responsibilities. Look at me, Carlos. Look at the person you’re asking to give more than he already has. Look at

what it's done to me and look at what's left. You want to use me again because of what I had to become in order to live up to that responsibility you keep talking about."

"Jason, you need to lie down."

"LOOK AT WHAT I AM!"

Jason's words were carried on a wave of aura with actual physical force. It struck Carlos like a bat hitting a ball, bouncing him off a wall of black cloud-stuff suddenly hard as stone. While the impact was nothing to a gold-ranker, he was profoundly astonished and fell sprawled to the floor. Looking up in shock, he saw that Jason had collapsed to the floor.

In the air above Jason's fallen form, the blue and orange light that had been gathering behind him had coalesced an eye the size of a wagon. Carlos had seen it come into being just as the aura had thrown him across the room and he still felt its gaze on him. The room's aura closed on Carlos, squeezing him like a fist, but only for a moment before the eye started to dissipate. It swiftly dispersed into nothing and the force it exuded vanished with it, releasing its grip on Carlos.

Carlos pushed himself to his feet, hurrying to examine Jason. He was unconscious and bleeding from his eyes and all of his scars as if they were fresh wounds. The room's savage aura dimmed enough that Carlos felt other presences in the room. He stood and turned to face them.

The sinister shadow figure was the most ordinary of Jason's three familiars, all of whom were now lined up in front of him. The blood clone looked like Jason but, to Carlos' aura senses, it felt less like a living thing than an unfathomable chasm of depthless hunger.

As for the last familiar, it was an empty cloak draped over a smaller version of the same eye that had just vanished from the room. Carlos sensed something utterly alien, even compared to the ravening leech monster disguised as Jason. It felt to Carlos as if physical reality itself was an affront to the entity; as if it might annihilate the world for having the temerity to exist.

It lacked anything close to the power to accomplish such a thing, just as the leech monster could not devour every living thing on the planet, despite feeling like that was its very purpose. The three familiars were all imposing on him with their auras, only silver rank but somehow combined and magnified by the cloud temple around him.

People had been calling Jason's abode a cloud temple since its very public transformation, but that was because of its appearance. Carlos had paid it minimal mind, even after experiencing the aura inside. Now, however, he felt it. He wasn't in a place; he

was in a territory. It belonged to someone on a level deeper than he could fathom and he had made that person it belonged to angry.

“It is time for you to go, Priest Quilido,” Shade, told him.

“I need to help him,” Carlos said, pointing at Jason on the floor.

“You’ve helped enough,” Shade said. “You took a man who has already paid the price for giving more than he had and you told him to give even more. Mr Asano has been working with Madam Arabelle to recover from living up to the responsibilities he took on when no one else would. It is unbecoming of a clergyman of the Healer to undo Madam Arabelle’s work, Priest Quilido.”

Shade raised an arm in Jason’s direction and a cloud bed rose from the floor, picking up Jason. Colin moved to adjust him so he was lying comfortably.

“I was wondering if I could do that,” Shade said. “I hesitated to experiment, with Mr Asano so weak and the building connected to him.”

He turned back to Carlos.

“You need to leave before I start testing just how much control I can exert over this building. Go, and direct Madam Arabelle here at her earliest opportunity.”

Carlos looked at the three familiars. He could feel the hostility pouring from all of them, somehow combined and magnified by the building. With a final glance at Jason, he walked to the door leading out of the room.

“Priest Quilido,” Shade called after him. “Do be thorough in explaining to Madam Arabelle what you have done here.”

## Chapter 575

### Quite a Lot of System Windows

Carlos sat on a pew, head in his hands. He felt a warm hand rest on his shoulder.

“You aren’t expected to be perfect, Carlos.”

“I hurt a man I was there to help because I was pushing him to help me kill, whatever I might have told him. And myself. What kind of a priest does that make me?”

“A human one. The power you wield might have changed you, Carlos, but you are still a mortal man. It’s not unforgivable to be selfish or to make mistakes. What you have to do now is no secret. You accept what you’ve done, make amends as best you can and you strive to do better, having learned from the experience.”

“He threw me across a room. With his aura. That’s something they can do.”

“Is that why you pushed him so hard? Because he’s like them?”

“I know he’s not one of them.”

“In your head, yes. But your heart?”

“I’m afraid that I’m going to lose my way.”

“A fear that you and Jason Asano share. Perhaps, if you can put aside your feelings about the messengers, you can help each other find the paths you need to take.”

Carlos looked around at the church service room, empty other than himself.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

\*\*\*

Jason awoke, minimising the system windows that joined the others he had pushed aside the last time he came to after passing out somewhere. He was back in a cloud bed while Arabelle watched over him from an armchair.

“If you keep mothering me,” he said in an achy croak, “then I’m going to have to marry Rufus.”

“He could do better.”

Jason laughed, bracing for the pain but found it surprisingly mild. In fact, he felt much better than he had before passing out.

“We told you that circulating your mana would accelerate recovery,” she told him. “We perhaps should have said don’t do it until you pass out, though.”

“I kind of hauled off on Carlos.”

“Do you feel bad about that?”

“Nope.”

“He’s a good man, but he gets caught up in looking to the future. If he sees a way to do good tomorrow, he sometimes overlooks the pain it takes today to get there.”

“I suppose I should be grateful he sees me as an agent instead of a victim. But he seemed pushier than what I remember. More driven. Has he run into the messengers before?”

“Yes. He lost people.”

Jason nodded.

“I know he’s trying to do what’s right. I also know how easy it is to convince yourself that you know what’s right better than everyone else. I’ve hurt people making that mistake as well.”

“You seem well balanced,” Arabelle told him. “I was worried that you would regress.”

“I’m a little fragile,” Jason said. “But not like I was. If that conversation had come right after I got back from Earth, that would be a different story. But he poked a healing wound, not an open one.”

“I’m glad. But you and I are going to talk about this at length, later.”

“I know. But I’m guessing you’re busy with those Order of Redeeming Light people.”

“Yes. Carlos has been trying to figure out how to undo what has been done to them without killing them.”

“How is that going?”

“It’s not. Trying to undo that kind of conversion, be it vampirism, vorger flesh abominations or anything else is something the Church of the Healer has pursued for centuries. Maybe millennia.”

“Maybe he’ll learn something from these order members or Gibson Amouz that can finally crack it. Better chasing that than ways to kill messengers.”

Arabelle nodded her firm agreement.

“I spoke briefly to Carlos about this, and will do so again. But I would appreciate you doing so as well. You know the feeling of having lost your way in the pursuit of worthwhile goals.”

Jason nodded.

“‘The road to hell is paved with good intentions,’ is the saying in my world. I’ll do what I can, but I could just make things worse.”

“He’s a little like you,” she said. “He can lose his way without the people around him to keep him on the path. He could use your insight, I think. And your understanding might help him avoid a bad road, be it through guilt or determination.”

Arabelle got to her feet.

“I’m assuming the hell at the end of this road you mentioned is not a good destination.”

“It does have all the good music,” Jason said.

\*\*\*

Left alone to rest, Jason finally turned to the system windows he had been pushing aside each time he regained consciousness.

“That’s quite a lot of system windows,” he murmured to himself and started pulling them up in order.

- 
- You have drawn power from a [Reality Core] to make your soul produce higher-rank mana.
  - Your body and soul form a non-binary gestalt.
  - Your gestalt being is producing abnormal mana.
  - Backlash from using abnormal mana will be distributed across your gestalt being, dispersing the level of harm.
- 

“I remember that one.”

- 
- You are attempting to use [Incomplete Portal Gate]. Attempt has failed.
  - You are forcibly applying abnormal mana to [Incomplete Portal Gate]. This will result in harm to your gestalt being.
- 

“And that one.”

- 
- You have opened a portal using an unstable medium. You are forcibly maintaining stability using large amounts of high-grade mana. Backlash from high-grade mana and harm from using an incomplete function of the cloud flask are both increased.
- 

“This is where it starts getting blurry.”

“Mr Asano, you are talking to yourself again,” Shade said.

“I’m talking to you. It’s a normal thing.”

“You sensed my presence?”

“Honestly, no. All I can feel is kind of a pointy tingle. If I try to move or use mana it becomes a very pointy tingle.”

“Neither ‘pointy’ nor ‘tingle’ are words one should use if they wish to be a person of decorum, Mr Asano, especially in conjunction with one another.”

“Because ‘pointy tingle’ sounds like there’s something wrong with your—”

“Yes, Mr Asano.”

Jason grinned as he pulled up the next system window.

- 
- You have opened a gate to your spirit realm. The abnormal mana being produced by your gestalt being has sealed the gate. End abnormal mana production to release the gate.
- 

“I think I remember this. Did I get chucked across the room?”

“Yes, Mr Asano.”

The next system window was an event log of messages about his body breaking down, interspersed with increasingly drastic actions taken to keep him alive. His grin turned into a rictus as he skimmed his way down, accessing a scroll bar that indicated the list was extremely long.

“Cut off my arms and legs?” he read.

“We wanted to cut off your head, Mr Asano, but you were unlikely to survive it.”

“That’s not a concept that really requires explanation, Shade. It’s fairly safe to assume that if you cut someone’s head off, it’ll kill them.”

“We have postulated that you could potentially survive, with Colin’s assistance.”

“Postulate meaning guess. I’m not going to check if I can survive decapitation, even if I’m guessing that I can. Also, I’d need to be in good condition for that scenario. Good for someone who doesn’t have a head anymore, obviously. I was not in good condition.”

“Which is why we did not risk it.”

Things at the bottom of the event log started getting strange. Some of the lines were written in an ideographic language that even his power to read what he thought were all languages couldn’t translate. Just making the attempt gave him a headache and sent the mana in his body cascading, triggering a sharp pain. Once it subsided, he made no further attempt to read it, skimming ahead to where normal language started appearing again.

- 
- You have attempted to establish a spirit domain.
  - You have already exceeded the maximum total spirit domain area.
  - You are of insufficient rank relative to the local ambient magic to establish a spirit domain.
  - You have failed to establish a spirit domain.
  - All mana used in the attempt to form a spirit domain has been expended.
- 

After that came more of the ideographs that he didn’t attempt to decipher, skimming down once more. This time the lines of incomprehensible language went on for excessive length. Even just skimming them Jason was getting a headache, but he also got a sense of familiarity from them that for some reason he instinctively associated with Gordon.

---



- You have attuned your body to resonate with the local dimensional membrane.
  - The physical emphasis of your gestalt being causing its physical/spiritual imbalance has been rectified.
  - Your ability to sense astral forces has increased.
  - You have forcibly unsealed the restricted effect of the title [Reality Hegemon].
- 

“Shade,” Jason said as he scrolled through screen after screen of the impenetrable ideographs. “What did Gordon do?”

“I am uncertain.”

Jason went back to scrolling through the alien script until he finally reached the end.

---

- Restrictions on [Fundament Gate] and [Firmament Bridge] have been removed.
  - [Fundament Gate] has been broken down.
  - [Fundament Core] has been added to your inventory.
  - [Fundamental Realm Authority Token] has been added to your inventory.
  - Your ability to control magic under the influence of [Builder] through the [Fundament Gate] has been lost.
  - Your ability to access the fundamental realm of physical realities has been lost.
  - [Firmament Bridge] has been broken down.
  - [Firmament Core] has been added to your inventory.
  - [Firmamental Bridge Anchor] has been added to your inventory.
  - Your ability to create astral constructs through the [Firmament Bridge] has been lost.
  - [Firmament Bridge] was a requirement for the [Incomplete Portal Gate] component of your [Cloud Flask]. [Incomplete Portal Gate] is no longer functional.
- 

“Uh, I think that might be bad.”

“Mr Asano?”

“I think my spirit realm just ate the things I needed to build the bridge linking Pallimustus and Earth. You know, the one that I have to build so that Earth doesn't become increasingly unstable and ultimately break down and be washed into oblivion.”

“That does sound less than ideal, Mr Asano. Perhaps some of the other system windows will offer a solution.”

Jason pulled up the next window as Shade suggested.

---

- You have an incomplete spirit realm. [Fundament Core] will automatically be consumed to establish an [Astral Throne].
- Your rank is insufficient to establish [Astral Throne].
- Abnormal mana being produced from your gestalt form is sufficient to establish [Astral Throne].
- [Fundament Core] has been consumed to establish [Astral Throne].

- You have an incomplete spirit realm. [Firmament Core] will automatically be consumed to establish an [Astral Gate].
  - Your rank is insufficient to establish [Astral Gate].
  - Abnormal mana being produced from your gestalt form is sufficient to establish [Astral Gate].
  - [Firmament Core] has been consumed to establish [Astral Gate].
- 

“Okay, I have no idea what any of that means. Shade, have you ever heard of an astral throne?”

“Oh dear.”

“Okay, that’s a yes. What about an astral gate?”

“I suppose it makes sense to have them both. Oh my.”

“Can you tell me about them?”

“That is probably a conversation best saved for when you can access your spirit realm, Mr Asano.”

“Can they help me solve my dissolving planet problem?”

“Perhaps the astral gate is a possibility, but this is not my field and it would be irresponsible of me to make any guesses as to the likelihood of that being the case. I believe that Hierophant Dawn is the correct person to pose those questions to.”

There were still more system windows and Jason pulled the next one up, hoping it had something to assure him that he hadn’t doomed the Earth. Unfortunately, they were all just notifications of things he already knew, like when his cloud house reflexively altered its form and when his body – which it kept calling his gestalt being – stopped producing abnormal mana.

“I think I need to talk with Dawn,” Jason said. “Do you think she’ll be cranky that I ate the magic bridge?”

“She gave you an object of great power and you used it to do something absurd, Mr Asano. If she failed to anticipate that by this stage, the shortcoming is hers.”

“That’s certainly true, but what I asked is if she’ll be cranky.”

“Yes, Mr Asano. I do believe she will.”