

Chapter 586

A Power That Did Not Belong to the World

Carlos was nervous as he moved through the cloud pagoda. Jason's familiar was clearly hostile, even as it guided him, and he worried that the entire building would be as well. He could sense its power, dormant for the moment but he had already had a taste of the power it could call on. That had only been a small, reflexive thing; he had no interest in being on the receiving end of dedicated hostility.

The last time Carlos had seen him, Jason had barely the strength to lift his own head. Even so, he had tapped into the building's power to make it his own, throwing the gold-rank Carlos across the room like a toy. What's more, he did it with raw aura manipulation. While there were essence users whose aura abilities offered telekinetic power, this was not the case for Jason. It wasn't in his power set.

Auras were a spiritual force, an expression of the soul, and using them on others could only be done on a spiritual level. There were exceptions, like most things with magic. An aura power common to the force confluence famously allowed auras to move things physically. Jason was not such an exception, however. None of his powers would let his aura do that.

The power of a silver-ranker to levitate was not unrelated to aura, but it was much more an expression of other aspects of an essence user's inherent power. The fact that gold-rankers could do more than just levitate, along with how and why that was possible, was something mostly hidden from low rankers. The concepts involved were usually only shared with elite members of the Adventure Society as they approached gold rank, and members in good standing of the Magic Society when they entered certain fields of study.

This was part of a larger body of restricted knowledge kept secret by the Adventure Society and Magic Society. Other organisations with powerful high-rankers, from churches to governments, all respected this restriction and did not disseminate the information either.

Different knowledge had different levels of restriction, and enforcement varied wildly depending on the information in question. Inherent changes that high-rankers go through was very loosely held information, as while only elites had it formally shared, any gold ranker could deduce a lot of it from simply having the power in question. Even if they had no formal introduction to the changes they were going through, they experienced them for themselves. Trial and error alone could teach them a lot, and most found the Adventure

Society tapping their shoulder, politely instructing them to not go sharing any such discoveries with low rankers.

Broad knowledge about the soul was also on the lighter end of the restricted information scale. Things like recovery from soul trauma allowing some people to develop unusual strength and abilities with their auras fell under this heading. It was relatively common knowledge, but its spread was discouraged due to the experiments that had been illicitly conducted to explore the concept.

Neither the Adventure Society nor the Magic Society wanted essence users being taken in batches and subjected to soul trauma in order to try and formalise a process of reliably strengthening auras. More than a few times over the course of their history, both organisations had to step in when someone was doing exactly that. There had been some success with such programs, with unwilling victims eventually developing strength similar to Jason's. For every success, though, there were many more essence users left irrevocably broken.

The reason most of the restricted information was held back was the same: some amoral researcher took the information and hurt many, many people trying to study it. This was something that Carlos had seen from early in his career, as a healer specialised in soul trauma. His work frequently centred on those victimised by banned research, so it had been necessary to officially induct him into such secrets early.

While some concepts in the restricted information list were relatively common, such as why certain essence were restricted, other information was much more tightly held. Although it was somewhat widely disseminated amongst high-rankers, anyone sharing it with lower-rankers was cracked down on hard. The Adventure Society's restriction enforcement division would be dispatched if the information in question was inappropriately leaked.

This information included details about racial gifts going through a secondary evolution, something both the Adventure Society and Magic Society actively denied was possible. This was because such evolutions were both very rare and disproportionately affected Adventure Society elites. The organisations wanted such individuals protected, as they were ideal candidates for unsavoury research. When a promising member of a prestigious guild or an aristocratic family went missing, or a promising self-made adventurer, it stirred up all manner of trouble.

Such information was restricted to gold-rank elites. This meant the most trustworthy members of the two large societies, upper-echelon temple members or high-ranking government officials. In the Adventure Society, for example, many members weren't

introduced to various secrets until they reached a two-star rating. Even at gold-rank, some members weren't told everything.

Gold-rank being the threshold for key information was chosen because it was the only rank where even limited information control became feasible. Reaching gold rank was difficult, and anyone operating outside of the Adventure Society's influence had a much harder time reaching gold-rank in the first place. Managing to do so without the society discovering their existence was almost impossible, and such individuals were kept track of as much as possible.

More legitimate gold-rankers, be they adventurers or not, had a lot of freedom from Adventure Society interference with their activities. Their activities were regularly tracked, however, especially those operating on the fringes. Gold rankers had to be careful about pushing their interests over the lines the Adventure Society was willing to tolerate, as while those lines were very broad, the penalties for crossing them were unforgiving.

Gold-rankers looking to conduct illicit research often used silver-rankers as proxies. Even if there wasn't a gold-ranker behind the curtain, silver-rankers were still usually the ones conducting less-than-savoury operations. The combination of relative freedom from Adventure Society attention while still having power and resources made them the porridge that was just right.

The silver-rankers conducting this research were usually completely outside the purview of the Magic Society and Adventure Society. As such, keeping information out of the hands of silver rankers meant such research was undertaken – and had to be stopped – less often. The information was too widely spread to be truly kept secret, but it at least reduced the problem when most silver rankers didn't know that such research was possible.

In most cases, it turned out to be a gold-ranker quietly backing the silver conducting the research, and both were heavily penalised when discovered. In most cases, the need to restrict the information they had already proven incapable of appropriately sequestering meant that the answer was execution. Given that any research had usually more than earned it made the process a simple one.

As a healer specialised in dealing with soul trauma, Carlos was one of the few legitimately inducted into such secrets at low rank. His entire career had been helping the victims of people who crossed the lines of decency in their magic research. In all that time, he'd never encountered anyone else like Jason Asano, who managed to encounter one great secret after another.

From being an outworlder to soul trauma to secondary evolutions, Jason kept stumbling blindly into concepts that ranged from rarely enforced restrictions to things that were heavily locked down. He knew for a fact that more than one discussion about what to do about it had been held at high levels, but as Jason was surrounded by powerful people who had told him what he should and shouldn't spread around, he was left alone. After all, he had not gone actively seeking out any of the things he had run into, and often been harmed by them. It was, after all, why Jason and Carlos had met.

Aside from his failings as a healer, since their last encounter Carlos' mind had been occupied with the latest thing Jason had run headlong into. Being able to exert physical force with the spiritual power of his aura was very far from ordinary, although not unique. Carlos himself had encountered others with an innate power to use their auras in such a way, but they weren't essence users.

"Through here, Priest Quilido," Shade said, standing beside a door that opened on its own.

Having the train of thought he was distracting himself with broken, Carlos moved through the door. Part of his unease in being in the cloud pagoda was that his gold-rank magical senses, normally so powerful, failed to extend further than he could see, and even across a room his ability to sense auras and unseen magic grew fuzzy.

The room was a sitting room open to a balcony instead of having a back wall. Two occupied armchairs had their backs to the panoramic ocean view, while the only other object in the room was a third chair, facing them. Jason was in one of the chairs, as expected. The other occupant was unnerving, as they had never met but Carlos recognised her by description.

The local celestines came in various ethnicities, but none of them combined alabaster skin with ruby eyes and hair. That didn't mean there was no one else matching that description in Rimaros, but even with his senses dimmed, Carlos was completely arrested by the woman whose presence dominated the room.

There was no doubt she was unsheathing her full aura on him, even with his senses heavily dulled. If they weren't, he'd probably have a headache already. If she wandered around like this the whole time, then the people around her would just bleed out their eyes and die. Normal people, maybe even lower-ranked essence users, too. She was revealing her full power here to make a point, and the fact that Jason was sitting next to her, unfazed, reiterated how bizarre he was as well.

Carlos had met his share of diamond rankers, but even compared to them the woman in front of him was on a different level. He had been sceptical about some of the

things he had heard about her, but now he fully believed them. Hers was a power that did not belong to the world in which he lived.

The things Carlos had heard about Dawn were as intimidating as they were vague. The idea of meeting Soramir Rimaros, founder of one of the most prestigious nations in the world, was a daunting prospect. Hearing of someone roaming around that he was scared of was a terrifying prospect. As for specifics he had heard little; mostly unreliable information about her relationships with Soramir, the Adventure Society, the royal family and, more recently, Jason.

What should have been the most reliable piece of information he'd been given was also the one he'd had the hardest time believing. Somehow, she had single-handedly eliminated one of the Builder's fortress cities, along with every diamond-rank threat it contained. The details around it were less certain, but one thing he had heard was that her power was so vast that forces of the greater cosmos had decreed she was only allowed to act once as her power was too great to be let roam free in their world. It had seemed utterly absurd when he heard it, but now face to face, it seemed a lot more plausible.

"I think you're scaring him," Jason said with a slight smile. "It might be best if you left Carlos and I alone."

Dawn looked Carlos up and down, her face unreadable. Her aura withdrew and Carlos let out a breath he didn't need or even realise he'd been holding. Her simple presence was enough that he reflexively turned to physiological responses his magical body had left behind decades ago.

Dawn stood up and moved next to Jason's chair.

"Still having lunch with Sophie, Belinda and Farrah?" Jason asked her.

"And Taika."

"Taika? I thought it was just going to be the girls."

"He's very gossipy."

"Are any of the rest of you?"

"Belinda said that's why we need him."

"I see," Jason said, clearly lying. "It'll do them some good to relax between contracts. Rimaros is such a nice place, but they can't afford to freely explore because they're caught up in my nonsense. Again. Look out for them, yeah?"

"Of course."

Despite being thrown by the incongruity of going from being washed in Dawn's power to seeing her have an ordinary conversation, Carlos noted her fingers subtly brushing Jason's forearm as she left. She moved to the balcony where flaming wings appeared

behind her and she flew off. As Carlos stared at the place she had taken off from, her chair dissolved into the floor and Jason's moved to position him directly opposite the remaining empty seat.

“Do sit down, Carlos.”

Chapter 587

A Gentleman Doesn't Tell

Carlos turned his attention to Jason as he sat down opposite him. He hadn't done more than glance at Jason since coming in, his attention arrested by Dawn. Even with his senses diminished, he could see that Jason was not in a good way. His skin was off colour and he was still emaciated, as he had been the last time they saw one another. He would have expected more recovery, deducing that what he had heard about Jason further injuring himself was true.

Although his condition was poor, Jason's alien eyes were very much alive. Carlos was struck again by how little concern Jason had for rank disparity, the silver ranker staring at him impassively. His steely expression had only softened while he chatted with Dawn. Their interaction left Carlos with a question that he knew he shouldn't ask, but the gentle intimacy of the gesture he had noticed between them had startled him.

"Are you and she...?"

"That's a little rude," Jason said. "But since I still need you to help guide my recovery, I'll put it under the category of doing a medical history."

Jason had coarse gravel in his voice.

"You are still willing to let me help you, then?"

"Carlos, are you the best soul trauma specialist on the planet?"

"I doubt it."

"Which isn't a no. As you've no doubt surmised, I'm pretty wrecked right now. And since by body and my soul are the same thing, I need all the help I can get."

"Jason, you're a unique case."

"I get that a lot. I used to think it was cool."

"I'm saying that while I can do my best, I'm going to be guessing at treatment. And that guess will mostly be 'rest because anything else might just make it worse.' I'm not sure how much I can do for you."

"Can anyone else do better?"

"Possibly."

"A lot better?"

"Possibly not. Not on this planet, anyway."

"I'll be honest, Carlos. My memory of how our encounter ended is a little fuzzy. My understanding is that I lashed out."

"Yes."

“I apologise for that. What I won’t apologise for is the anger that led me to that point. What you asked me to do was unbecoming of you as a man, a healer and as a friend.”

Carlos nodded. He had pushed Jason to let him study Jason’s recovery with an eye for how to fight those who had bodies like his that were souls made manifest; the physical and spiritual as one. The messengers who had followed the Builder’s lead in invading the world had such bodies and Carlos had pushed Jason to reveal his own weaknesses, in hope they would translate to the messengers as well.

“You’re right,” Carlos said. “I apologise, unreservedly. I have nothing but remorse for my behaviour and I won’t make excuses for it, but you deserve at least an explanation.”

“The explanation is obvious,” Jason said. “You’ve encountered messengers before and you lost people. People who meant a lot to you and it left you feeling helpless. I don’t need to know the specifics; you want a way to hurt the people that hurt you.”

Carlos nodded.

“I won’t begrudge you those feelings,” Jason told him. “While I was away, a gold ranker killed my brother, my lover and a friend. I know that drive for revenge and the directions it can push you.”

“Did you get your revenge?”

“Not with my own hands. Like you, I recognised that personal action would not get me far and made an oblique approach. I arranged for his demise. My dead girlfriend asked me to let it go and I would have, if he hadn’t come for me again. Or maybe I wouldn’t. I could have let him live, at the end, and I chose to have him die.”

The gravel in Jason’s voice was especially stony as he talked about arranging the death of a man. Carlos was not moved by it, however.

“Then you don’t know what it’s like after all,” he said. “Waiting years. Decades. Longer than you’ve been alive. I won’t be able to find the specific messengers, if they even came back to this world. I wouldn’t recognise them after all these years if they did. My memory at iron rank wasn’t what it is, now that I’m gold.”

“I suppose I don’t know that frustration. But I do know what it is to be helpless to stop people dying at the hands of powers I’ll never be able to challenge. I’ve done my share of staring into the abyss; shouting into the void. The void is still there, same as ever. I’m the one who was changed for it.”

“You’re saying I should let it go.”

“No. I’m saying that I understand taking your chances where you can get them, and what that costs. You feel lesser for what you asked of me, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Carlos admitted.

“You’re older than me, Carlos. By quite a bit. But I’ve packed a lot into the last handful of years, and I’ve made a lot of choices I’m not proud of, even though I’d make them again, if it came to it. I’m the lesser for having made them, but I can afford to be. My job is to fix problems, usually by making them suffer and die. Your job is to make people better. For good or ill, you can’t afford to make yourself worse.”

Jason sighed.

“I guess I am saying you should let it go. It sucks, but sometimes you just have a find a way to go forward without getting the answers you wanted.”

“How is that going for you?” Carlos asked pointedly.

“Real crappily,” Jason said with a self-deprecating laugh. “But I think I’m starting to get there.”

Carlos spend no small amount of time examining Jason with a plethora of tools he pulled out one after another. Jason patiently endured through it, knowing that he couldn’t keep doing what he had done to his body without repercussions.

“I’m familiar with authority as a concept,” Carlos said while continuing the latest examination. It involved Jason sticking his leg out while Carlos ran a hoop up and down its length, careful to avoid touching the hoop to Jason’s skin.

“You’ve seen it before?”

“No,” Carlos said. “I’ve heard of it. The idea of a mortal harming themselves by using it is completely absurd. Obviously, I should have learned more about every insane thing a person couldn’t possibly do to themselves, in anticipation of treating you for doing them all.”

Jason chuckled.

“Jason, there’s something I’d like to talk about. It’s awkward because it’s about the messengers, and the last time we discussed them things went badly.”

“Are you going to try and convince me to subject myself to experiments on how best to kill me again?”

“No. I hope I never lose sight of myself that badly again.”

“Then just tell me.”

Carlos nodded and finished up his examination. He put the testing device back into a dimensional bag and went back to his chair.

“You said your memory of our altercation was hazy,” Carlos said.

“Yep,” Jason said. “I have a vague memory of getting angry and tapping into the cloud house. After that it all gets fuzzy.”

“You threw me across the room.”

“Sorry about that. You weren’t hurt were you? I don’t think I activated any of the building’s true defences.”

“I was unharmed, but what happened to me isn’t what matters. How you did it is.”

“I was pretty wrecked. I’m assuming I drew on the strength of the house. It is what I was trying to do.”

“My concern is what you did with that strength. When you threw me, you used your aura, and your aura alone.”

“My aura power can’t do that.”

“I know,” Carlos agreed.

Jason sat in silence for a moment, absently tapping a finger to his lips, his expression contemplative.

“This is about my soul existing physically, isn’t it? You said this was related to the messengers, and they’re physical-spiritual gestalts, like me. They can do what I did?”

“Yes,” Carlos said. “They can use their auras to manipulate the physical world. It seems that you can do the same, but the question is whether you can do it on your own or if you need the support of whatever your cloud house does for you.”

“Should I try it out?”

“Definitely not,” Carlos said. “Until you are fully recovered, lets leave experimenting with unknown powers of the shelf. But I would like to learn about your cloud house. As you might imagine, your tests all came back extremely anomalous. I need all the information I can get to best help along your recovery.”

“The cloud house is off limits,” Jason said. “Some secrets I have to keep. I think that maybe your gods can help you with the right approach, so... pray on it? I’m not sure how that really works. Gods normally come to me for a chat, so I’m not super familiar with... Carlos, are you okay?”

Carlos closed his mouth after his jaw was left hanging open.

“Mate, it looked like your eyes were going to open so wide your skin would peel back off your skull. What’s the matter?”

“Gods normally come to you?”

“Not always. I went to Knowledge’s temple once. That was the day I learned that gods are real. She was a little miffed that I saw one in the worship square and she wasn’t my first.”

Carlos ran his hands over his face.

“Jason, you are, without even the most remote of competition, the single most complicated patient I’ve ever had. And I’ve spent decades dealing with people who’ve had their souls hammered like iron in a smithy. I’ll see if my god has any insight on how to approach your treatment, but I’d like to know everything you’re willing to tell me about the various forces you’ve channelled through your body. The tests I performed suggested that you underwent something that served to help you recover before something else made you worse. I’m assuming the authority you used was what harmed you again, but I’m curious about the recovery.”

“I try be a gentleman about these things,” Jason said, “but since it’s medical-related, I suppose I can tell you. You know how high-rankers aren’t usually intimate in the old fashioned way?”

“I’m familiar,” Carlos said. “There’s little point fulfilling physical urges that you’ve moved past. Gold rankers don’t feel the need for ordinary physical intimacy. I imagine you are much the same, with your outworlder body accelerating the transition to being fully magical.”

“Oh, I’m well past that stage. So, Dawn showed me something that high-rankers do with their auras.”

“And you could do it?”

“Yeah it was... well, that aspect isn’t medically relevant. But yes.”

“That’s not something people can normally do before gold rank, but at this point it’s going to take more than that to surprise me.”

Jason opened his mouth to respond but Carlos forestalled him with a raised hand.

“That wasn’t a challenge, Jason.”

Jason’s shoulders slumped.

“Fine.”

“I’m familiar with the energy exchange process, being a gold ranker myself. What I need to know is how it impacted your recovery so I can incorporate it into establishing a treatment program. Anything you can tell me would help.”

“No worries. You know, I never found out what they call it here. On my world it’s sometimes referred to as dual cultivation, although there are some very sketchy ideas around that...”

For the remaining duration of the monster surge, Carlos started with daily visits as he worked out the most effective treatment rituals and alchemical supplements to accelerate

Jason's recovery. As they narrowed down the most effective solutions, his visits gradually decreased, leaving Carlos time for other pursuits.

Aside from Jason, his major project was the prisoners taken when the Order of Redeeming Light's secret base had been discovered and raided. He was studying the effects of the ritual of purification they had gone through and if it could be undone. His revelation that the order was not what it seemed, and neither was the god behind it, had opened a huge can of worms that he had thankfully passed on to larger authorities to deal with.

Once the truth was out, the deity Disguise gave up the pretence of being Purity, throwing an already chaotic world into yet more chaos. While the Ecumenical Council of churches, the Adventure Society and governments across the world were exploring the ramifications of Purity not being Purity, Carlos was attempting to undo what the purification ritual had done.

"It wasn't a purification at all," Carlos explained to Jason as he lay in a ritual circle within his cloud pagoda. "Rather than cleaning things out of people, it was introducing some kind of foreign element."

Above Jason was a complex array of magical light, constantly shifting as glowing tendrils reached down to touch Jason's body. They had been discussing the topic during Jason's treatments for weeks.

"Are you sure you should be telling me this stuff? I'm pretty sure they don't let one-star adventurers get briefed on the important stuff."

"Where's Dawn today?"

"She's talking with Soramir about... oh, I see what you did there."

"Jason, three-star adventurers are meant to go on the most politically sensitive missions. Given that any three-star mission right now has a good chance of starting with 'find out what Jason Asano is up to,' is there any point in giving you a star rating? I've been talking to a lot of the Adventure Society high-ups. I'm pretty sure that, given the choice, they'd replace the stars on your Adventure Society badge by engraving the words 'Asano, you bastard.'"

"That's a little hurtful. What did I do?"

"You caused a lot of powerful people to have even more powerful people leaning over them. They hate that."

"So they just decided I can know whatever?"

"No one actually said it, but you could probably just ask Soramir Rimaros or Princess Liara or Dawn the magic space princess."

“Magic space princess?”

“That’s what your friend Travis called her, and it seemed about right. Nothing makes sense around you, do you realise this?”

“Everything makes sense around me. I’m a very sensible man.”

“Sure. But yes: no one will come down on us for me telling you about the prisoners and the purification ritual.”

“You explained that before, right?” Jason asked. “You said it was some kind of modified vampire curse.”

“I did. I wasn’t sure how much of that conversation you remembered.”

“The early bits clearly enough. As I recall, the question was whether you could remove the taint without killing the people who have it.”

“Exactly,” Carlos said. “Once the curse of a lesser vampire reaches a completed state, it can no longer be cleansed by ordinary means, even with a cleansing power as strong as yours. All attempts to do so have been fatal for the subject, which is something my church has wanted to overcome for a very long time.”

“Sophie’s mother,” Jason said, worry in his voice.

“You still have her locked up?”

“I’m not giving her to the Adventure Society. She won’t tell them anything they want as is, and I won’t let them risk killing her trying to strip out whatever is in her.”

“Is she still adhering to the idea that Purity is still her god?”

“Yes. The prisoners are still doing the same?”

“Yes, there’s something about what was done to them that makes them ignore facts that contradict their beliefs, however obvious.”

“We have a lot of that in my world too. We call it faith as well, funnily enough.”

“Jason, to some of us, our religion is very important. So, perhaps you could avoid being a huge prick about it?”

“Sorry. Your boss does seem like a decent guy.”

“I’m optimistic that my current research will reveal a way to remove this taint from these people. There might be some hope for Miss Wexler’s mother. My hope is that, if I’m successful, it might lead to a method for undoing vampire curses and similar transformations.”

“That would be amazing. What kind of timeline are we looking at?”

“I have no idea. Long. This will probably be my life’s work, and the life’s work of many other healer priests. My advice would be to keep a tight hold on Miss Wexler’s mother until

I have a reliable way to treat her, whatever the Adventure Society and Callum Morse may want.”

“He hasn’t been talking to you, has he?”

“Jason, I’m the only person not in your tight circle who regularly goes in and out of this pagoda. Everyone has been talking to me.”

“Oh. Sorry about that.”

“No need to apologise. For all the ridiculous things you involve yourself in make my life harder, I fully respect that each one represents dangerous sacrifice that you risked your life to make. Well, except the ones where you were making time with—”

“That’s enough of that,” Jason chided. “A gentleman doesn’t tell, and his doctor shouldn’t either.”

Chapter 588

Recalibrate Their Expectations

“I want to try opening up some portals,” Jason said as Carlos was about to leave after his latest treatment session. They were standing in the vast atrium, by the large double doors that served as the main entrance.

“I would strongly advise against it,” Carlos told him. “You are largely recovered, but if you push too hard, you could backslide. Keep doing the mana circulation exercises and use your non-dimensional powers. Anything that touches the astral will likely exacerbate the remaining damage and complicate your recovery.”

“But all my non-dimensional powers are very murderous. Are you telling me to go kill someone?”

“You know that I’m not. Look, use your shadow hands and learn how to juggle or something.”

“Juggle? You want me to ride a unicycle, next?”

“I don’t know what that is, but so long as it doesn’t involve dimensional forces, go for it.”

Carlos chuckled at Jason’s aghast expression, opened one of the double doors and left. Outside, a beautiful woman with blue hair was approaching across the lawn.

“Princess Liara,” Carlos greeted as they moved past one another.

“Priest Quilido.”

Inside, Jason looked out at Liara, who stopped just outside the threshold of the pagoda’s doorway.

“Is this an official visit?” Jason asked.

“Yes.”

“How is your husband?”

“Well, thanks to you. He wanted me to convey his gratitude.”

“I have no interest in an official visit. A social one, on the other hand, is very different. Let your husband convey his gratitude in person.”

The door closed itself between them.

Princess Liara and her husband, Baseph, were travelling from Livaros to Arnote in a flying carriage. Theirs was a political marriage, but after several decades and three children, there was a hard-to-match intimacy between them. They had been friends and occasional lovers across the years, but had been growing closer recently.

Liara had spent most of her career hunting down those who violated the Adventure Society's list of restricted activities. In the course of doing so, she had met Carlos a number of times, as his job was to help the victims of those Liara and her team had hunted down. Knowing him was why she had followed Jason's suggestion to bring Carlos in to work with the Order of Redeeming Light prisoners.

When she had been reassigned to the Builder response unit in Rimaros, several years earlier, Liara settled into her home for a longer stretch than she had since her children were young. More time with her husband, this time without a trio of little princes and princesses underfoot, had brought them close.

Their latest time together had come to an end when Baseph agreed to take on the role of administrator of an underwater mining complex. This proved a harrowing choice as it was raided by religious fanatics and Baseph and no small number of his staff had to be extracted by unconventional means.

Jason Asano had done exactly that, at significant cost to himself. The spectacular light and aura show that came directly after was the by-product of efforts to keep him alive in the aftermath. Carlos refused to discuss his patient, but the fact that he was regularly visiting Asano spoke volumes as to how profoundly damaged Jason had been.

Because of how her husband was rescued, Liara knew she owed Jason no small amount of debt. This was complicated by her relationship with Asano, which was a strange one, by her standards. Given who Jason was famously spending time with, it was probably quite ordinary from his perspective.

They had met when she was tasked with using him in anti-Builder operations. At the same time, he was also roped into political machinations managed by Liara's friend and fellow royal, Vesper Rimaros. Events had overtaken them, however, rendering petty political goals pointless and Vesper dead. Her sacrifice had been a key part of saving the island of Livaros from destruction.

Liara had struck up something of a friendship with Asano's familiar, Shade. He had proven to be a communication lynchpin when many other techniques fell short, at least in the time they had to work with. More practical solutions had since been put in place, and she had found herself missing the discreet and polite shadow entity.

Now, Liara was tasked with being the royal family's liaison with Asano again. Following the evacuation of the underwater complex, bizarre events had been surrounding Asano. His strange, changing building had become a fortress and, after much analysis, it was decided that imposing external will on Asano was a bad idea. His building, now a pagoda, was strongly suspected to have strange and powerful protections.

That analysis was partly based on Liara's own experiences. She had been inside the cloud house and felt its power, dormant but deep, like a lake with a monster sleeping at the bottom. But the defences were not the reason she had argued strongly against going in to take Asano.

Liara owed Asano and did not take that debt lightly. He and his team had been critical in the underwater complex rescue, rescuing her husband and even revealing the Order of Redeeming Light's location. They had taken risks and Jason had almost killed himself; the idea of repaying that with what could, at best, be considered heavy-handedness was something she was staunchly against.

That was without even considering the forces Jason was involved with, including the god of Dominion, who had stopped by for what observer reports referred to as a 'casual chat.' Even ignoring that, Liara knew what came of trying to push Jason Asano underfoot. She had very thoroughly gone through his Adventure Society file, the restricted parts included.

For his entire career, and even before, Jason had been dealing with powerful and dangerous people. Time and again, while Asano often paid a price, it was the other side that ended up losing. From blood cultists to crime lords to a Magic Society director to great astral beings; looking down on Jason Asano because of his rank was a demonstrably bad idea.

Even though she understood why, Liara did not appreciate being the one assigned to handle him for the royal family. It meant that she was forced to meet him with an agenda rather than the gratitude that should be the only thing she brought to his door.

"I don't like this," she said, sitting in the carriage next to her husband.

Sitting opposite them were their three children, all silver rank, like their father. Dara was the eldest, and like the middle child, Zareen, had followed their mother into adventuring. The youngest was the only son, Joseph, who was an administrative official with the Amouz family business interests, like his father.

"It's fine," Baseph said, giving Liara's hand a comforting squeeze.

"I don't like that he asked me to bring you before he'd talk to me," Liara said. "It's like he wants a hostage."

"Of course he does," Zareen said. "It's a power play, and one he's smart to make. He's been silver rank for less time than I have and look at what he's caught up in. The people looking at him now are used to just taking what they want from silver-rankers. He needs to recalibrate their expectations so that they approach him from a position of

negotiation instead of making demands. I bet there have already been discussions about going into that building of his and dragging him out.”

Zareen was the physically smaller of the two daughters, not inheriting her mother's height, but she did have the iconic sapphire hair and eyes of the royal family. She was much more interested in politics than her mother and had been close to the politically-savvy Vesper, prior to her death. It had earned Zareen her three-star rating with the Adventure Society, as someone who could take on the most delicate of missions.

“I hate this,” Liara complained. “I’m a hunter, not a politician.”

“If you don’t want to go probing this guy for information, then don’t,” Dara said. “Tell the family you won’t do what they want.”

Dara was a one-star adventurer, and happy to be so. It meant she only qualified for simple monster-hunting missions, which was exactly how she liked it. Even less interested in politics than her mother, she had Liara’s height but Baseph’s dark copper hair and eyes. She was muscular and a highly capable frontline combatant, compared to her tricky sister and stealthy mother.

“Sure, Dara,” Zareen said. “She should go to the king and his ancestral majesty Soramir and tell them that she doesn’t want to do that.”

“I would.”

“We know,” Zareen said.

“Refusing to do what the family wants would only mean they send someone who doesn’t know Asano,” Liara said. “The man we’re going to see has had people like me hovering over him since he became an adventurer. I’ve read his file and seen how that turns out when people like me push him. It’s not a good idea.”

“It seems to be working out for him,” Dara said.

“This is what you think working out looks like?” Zareen asked. “He’s a turtle in his shell, hiding from the many forces that want a slice of him.”

“Yeah, but he's on the big stage, isn't he? We're princesses, and only the protocol servants know who we are.”

“We’re fairly borderline as princesses go, Dara. And having to hide isn’t the only thing this guy has had to deal with.”

“No, it isn’t,” Liara said. “I don’t want any of you to go through what he has, which is why...”

She turned a glare on her husband.

“...I was against any of you coming along and getting involved in this.”

“We want to meet the man who saved our father,” Joseph said.

“I want to meet the man who spend the last two months sitting around in his house, telling the most powerful people in the city to bog off,” Dana said. “I want to be like that.”

“That’s not how I would describe it,” Liara said. “And I don’t want you to share Asano’s experiences. If Carlos Quilido takes months to heal something, that’s something you very much want to avoid happening to you.”

“I’m more interested in the man himself,” Zareen said. “Is it true that his aura is as strong as a gold ranker’s?”

“Yes,” Baseph said. “It’s a little unsettling, if I’m being honest. I felt it being projected out of that house of his, the day of the rescue.”

“Everyone on the island, did,” Liara said. “I felt it from Livaros.”

“It’s very domineering,” Baseph said. “I can see why dominion likes him.”

“The royal family was looking at marrying him in, wasn’t it?” Zareen asked.

“No,” Liara scolded, jabbing a finger at Zareen. “Don’t even think about it.”

“My quiet little town has been a lot less quiet since you arrived,” Pelli told Jason as they sat on a balcony of his pagoda, sharing a pitcher of tropical juice and more magic-infused alcohol than was strictly appropriate for late morning. She was the mayor of Palisaros, the once sleepy little beach town on a lagoon where Jason had settled. She was a member of the royal family but also separate from them, although Jason was unaware of the circumstances.

Jason was being visited by Pelli and Estella Warnock. The trio had struck up something of a friendship when working together to defend Arnote from loose monsters during the Builder’s attack on Rimaros. With the adventurers busy going to war, the three had needed to step in, since the monster surge didn’t care what people were doing and just kept producing monsters.

Contrary to what Carlos may have thought, it was they and not he who were Jason’s most frequent visitors over the course of his convalescence. Estella Warnock had moved into her grandfather’s house, not far from Jason’s, and was beholden to no organisations. With Pelli acting as a shield for her, she had managed to remain that way, even with people now paying her close attention as she went in and out of the pagoda.

“I’m genuinely sorry about what’s happened here,” Jason told Pelli. “I was looking for a nice, quiet time. I always suspected things might get a little boisterous for me, but I never expected it to be this much or this fast.”

“It has been good for local business,” Pelli acknowledged. “All the rental homes have been booked out by people here to watch you for one organisation or another. Two new cafés have opened.”

“And are you the one watching me for the royals?”

“I took myself away from all that nonsense for a reason,” Pelli said. “I don’t want to end up with some upstart rescuing my husband only to turn around and threaten him.”

“I’m not threatening anyone’s husband – which you don’t have, by the way. I’m just using Liara to set a tone for future interactions. I need to show that I won’t be dictated to.”

“You know that the smart move would be to let them dictate away and then just ignore them. Less confrontational.”

“I’ve never been one for the smart move. I don’t think I like what that says about me.”

Pelli chuckled, then looked out over the balcony.

“I’m pretty sure that’s their carriage I can sense heading this way, so I’ll trot off.”

She stood up and Estella did the same.

“I’ll go to,” Estella said, then claimed the pitcher from the small table that held the drinks.

“I’m also taking this.”

“No worries,” Jason said with a chuckle.

Jason got to his feet as Pelli nimbly vaulted the railing, not bothering to leave by the door.

“Asano, I have been contacted by people,” Estella said. “Pelli has been shielding me from strangers, but this is someone I know.”

“And?”

“We should talk about it. But I told them I wouldn’t do anything until you were recovered, so I’ll tell you about it then.”

“Sounds good.”

Chapter 589

Deeds of Legend

Liara's family was sitting around a dining table filled with food. Liara had a glower as Baseph held her hand under the table, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

"...little did I know that your mother had leaked information about my route to use me as bait to try and catch some Builder cultists," Jason said, continuing his story.

"She didn't!" Zareen said with a laugh.

"Oh, she did. Except it wasn't Builder cultists that ambushed me, but Purity fanatics."

"Why were Purity fanatics after you?"

"Well, ostensibly they were doing it as part of a deal with the Builder. I have a few tricks up my sleeve for dealing with the Builder's own goons, so he gave the Order of Redeeming Light a—"

Liara coughed pointedly.

"...undisclosed asset, in return for going after me," Jason finished.

"They were just doing it as part of a deal with the Builder. It's all very complicated."

"You realise," Liara said to Jason, "that all of this is, strictly speaking, restricted information."

"Send me a fine or something," Jason said. "Anyway, they weren't going to kill me – at least, not yet. As it turned out, a friend of mine is the long-lost daughter of the leader of this order of Purity fanatics and they want to use me as bait to get their hands on her, before dealing with me for the Builder."

"You're kidding," Zareen said.

"It's all true," Jason said. "You'd have to be a real hack to come up with something that outlandish. So, I get jumped by these Purity nutbags, and the Builder had clearly been talking out of school about my powers because they were prepared to counter my abilities."

"That was when mother stepped in to save you?" Joseph asked.

"Oh, you'd think so, wouldn't you?" Jason asked.

"You fought them off then?" Dara asked. "How many were there?"

"I gave it a go, but no," Jason said. "There were three of them and I copped a drubbing. They chased me through the jungle until they finally pinned me down. Now, I'd already realised that your mother, or someone working for her, was probably watching. I knew she viewed me as expendable and these people had been a little too well-prepared. I couldn't be certain she was actually there, though, so I fought until I didn't have any other

options. So, there I am, on my knees in the jungle, covered in mud. The only option I've got left is to point out your mother, who I was *relatively* confident was there."

"Why hadn't you shown yourself already?" Joseph asked Liara.

"Yes, Princess," Jason asked, his tone a gleeful twist of the knife. "Why hadn't you?"

"She wanted to see how well he could fight," Dara guessed. "If you are going to have an ally, you should understand their capabilities and limitations."

"No," Zareen said. "Mother wanted Mr Asano captured, so she could follow the Purity adherents back to the others. Which Mr Asano realised and ruined by revealing her presence. Even if mother hadn't revealed herself at that point, or he had been wrong and she wasn't there, it would make them a lot more cautious about returning to wherever they were based. That would give Mr Asano more chances to escape captivity."

"I told you to call me Jason."

Jason continued to amuse the siblings with anecdotes as Liara looked on with disapproval and Baseph with amusement. As Shade was clearing away the plates from the dessert course, Jason looked down at the floor, then turned to Baseph.

"It looks like my team is arriving home from a mission," he said.

Baseph was an experienced spouse to a politically important person and did not miss the signal.

"Great, I'll be able to thank them again. Come along, kids."

"Dad, I'm thirty-seven," Dara said.

"Of course you are, sweetie."

Shade led them away, leaving Liara and Jason alone. Jason got up and cloud stuff emerged from a wall before solidifying into a wooden drinks cabinet. He opened it up and started mixing drinks.

"You have a lovely family," he said as he worked. His voice was sincere, without the tinge of amusement that usually underpinned his tone.

"Did you have to bring them into this?"

"I would have preferred a purely social engagement, it's true. But that isn't an option for either of us, is it Princess?"

"No," Liara said. "No, it isn't."

Jason moved back to the table, setting one glass down in front of Liara and sipping at another as he sat back down.

"Did they tell you to try and getting something specific out of me, or just whatever you could?" he asked.

"They want you to come in to the Adventure Society for a debrief."

“I bet they do.”

“You know that you can’t hide in here forever.”

“I know. But I’m sure you’ve noticed that my life can get very complicated, very fast. Until I’m fully recovered, I have no interest in exposing myself to the next unexpected event or person making decisions for me for the greater good.”

“Which I’m happy to go back and tell them. Honestly, you should get out of the Storm Kingdom. You’ve generated a lot of goodwill, here, but there are a lot of people who see you as an asset more than a person.”

Jason chuckled.

“I’ve become quite accustomed to local authorities taking that particular stance. You know, if some of your fellow gold rankers do decide to offer me a very firm invitation in person, don’t discourage them too hard. It’s been a while since gold rankers showed up looking for trouble and I’ve made a few upgrades since then. I’d be interested in seeing how it works out.”

“I can never tell if you’re being serious.”

“It’s a funny thing. I never used to be serious and now I always am, yet I’ve been the same level of ridiculous the whole time. When your life is outrageous, you have to be outrageous to live it.”

Jason frowned.

“I’m starting to sound like a book about finding yourself in Tuscany. I may be about to meet a nice man. Also, I think vampires may have ruined Tuscany.”

Liara shook her head.

“You’re not getting any easier to deal with, Jason.”

He chuckled.

“What do you need to go back to your people with a win, Liara?”

“You could hand over Melody Jain.”

“Not happening.”

“No one knows what you’ve got going on, Jason, and holding that woman is a signal that you’re operating on some agenda of your own.”

“Everyone is operating on some agenda of their own, Princess.”

“Not everyone has as much impact when they do, Mr Asano. The last thing we need is another interdimensional threat while you’re holding meetings with great astral beings.”

“That’s fair,” Jason conceded.

“I’ve already gotten quite a lot out of you. I know those titbits you were dropping as you entertained my children were not in there by accident.”

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Jason said innocently. "If you managed to glean something from my sparkling lunch conversation, that's down to your political prowess."

"We didn't know that they wanted to keep you alive because of Sophie Wexler."

"Her mother shared that little nugget."

"You've got her talking?"

"Her daughter has. Not what you'd call an interrogation, but we've managed to pick up a thing or two."

"I would love to listen in on those conversations."

"Shade," Jason said.

Jason still wasn't using his own dimensional abilities, so he'd been using Shade's dimensional storage as an ancient wallet from beyond reality. He took out a folder and pushed it across the table to Liara.

"You'll have to settle for transcripts," Jason said. Liara moved to open the folder and Jason put his hand on it to stop her. "Social event, Princess. You can take your peek once you're on the way home."

Liara gave Jason a flat look but placed the folder in a dimensional pouch at her waist.

"You know this won't be enough," Liara said. "You rattled a lot of windows when you had gods and great astral beings coming by to chat on your lawn."

"Okay, a few points. One, there was only one god, and he wasn't invited. You know what gods are like."

"No, Jason. I do not know what gods are like."

"And besides, the result of that meeting was the Builder going away. What do I have to do to get people on side?"

"What were you expecting? You made the Builder leave. What kind of silver ranker can do that?"

"You know that there's context to these events."

"Yeah, because that's how legends go. Deep dives into historical context."

"I think legend is a stretch."

"No, Jason; it isn't. Some guy told the Builder to go away and he did. People will be telling that story for a long time, and they won't be going into the contextual nuances. It'll just get grander in the telling."

Jason let out a tired, wincing laugh.

"You know, that's exactly what I imagined when I became an adventurer. Deeds of legend."

“And now?”

“They’re a lot more fun from far away.”

Jason drained his glass.

“The powers that be are looking for some assurance that I’m not some herald of the next big threat, yes?”

“There are also the ones who want to know how you got into this position so they can exploit it for themselves, but we try not to let them talk too much at meetings.”

Jason laughed.

“What does Soramir say? He’s going to set the tone.”

“Yes, he is.”

“And?”

“He says that someday, you’re going to be diamond rank, and you’ll remember how you were treated at silver.”

“I thought diamond rankers were meant to be above petty vengeance over the past.”

“They are,” Liara said. “Because they get all their petty vengeance out of the way early.”

She smiled as Jason laughed again.

“You seem less weighed-down,” she told him. “You were quite intense when you first came to Rimaros. Like an alchemical bomb that could go off if it was shaken too hard.”

“I went through a lot in the other world, and I didn’t have my team with me. Now, most of my affairs are settled and what I want more than anything else is to spend some time being as ordinary an adventurer as I can manage. With my friends. Which, right now, means getting away from Rimaros.”

“I’m not sure that ordinary is ever going to be a path you get to walk, Jason.”

“Yeah, well if anyone in your circle has any ideas to make that easier, let me know. Seriously; I think everyone would be happier if I stood out less.”

“I’ll put it to the Adventure Society.”

“Thank you, I apprecia...”

“What is it?” Liara asked after Jason trailed off.

“It seems that your eldest has taken a liking to my boy Humphrey.”

“Oh dear.”

“Yeah,” Jason said as he stood up. “His girlfriend doesn’t have a lot of approaches to conflict resolution, so we should probably get down there.”

“You can see what’s going on anywhere in the building?” Liara asked, also getting to her feet.

"Nothing is hidden from me, in this place. Come on; we can use the fireman's pole."

"The what?"

Dara rubbed the side of her head.

"I'd have had her if she'd stop moving for one damn second."

"I imagine that's why she didn't sweetie," Baseph told her. "Now, get in the carriage."

He led her out through the double doors. Gathered in the Atrium was Jason and his team, minus Humphrey and Sophie, along with Liara and her other two children.

"It was lovely to meet you," Jason told Zareen and Joseph. "And while I'm very flattered, I'm not looking for the entanglements a political marriage would bring."

"Mother, what did you tell him?" Zareen asked.

"Oh, you need to watch what you say in this building," Belinda said. "Jason sees and hears everything. I'm still convinced he watches Humphrey and Sophie—"

"Lindy!" Clive admonished.

"What?" Belinda asked. "You think he does too."

"Yes, but we don't discuss that kind of thing in front of company."

"Oh, sorry."

"Would you two please stop?" Jason asked them. "You're making me look bad in front of the royalty."

"Since when do you care?" Neil asked. "I remember you saying that royalty were all a bunch of—"

"So lovely of you to come by, Liara," Jason said. "Please give my best to the king or whoever."

Jason stepped out on the balcony from his bedroom, stretching his arms in the morning sun. Shade emerged from a shadow to stand beside him.

"I'm sure I'm fully recovered," he said. "I feel fine. Better than fine. You know I always come out of these scrapes stronger than when I went in."

"You promised Priest Quilido that you would not start using your dimensional abilities until he conducted final tests," Shade said.

"I thought you didn't like him."

"I have no idea what you are talking about. And even if that were the case, it has no relation to his abilities as a physician."

"Fine. When is he coming by?"

"He sent his regrets, as his research has delayed him. He will be along in the evening, rather than the afternoon."

Jason groaned.

"There are other ways to occupy your time, Mr Asano. Princess Zara Rimaros has invited you to visit the memorial put up for Miss Vesper."

"They were close, weren't they? Vesper was Zara's escort to Greenstone."

"Then shall I respond positively?"

"No, it smells like a trap."

"I don't think she would do that, Mr Asano, although perhaps others might seize the opportunity. I shall extend your regrets."

"Thank you. Anything else?"

"The Adventure Society seems to have taken Princess Liara's visit as a positive sign and asked for you to meet a representative."

"Liara is an Adventure Society official. A high-ranking one, at that. Who are they sending in my direction?"

"Richard Geller."

"They're sending Rick? I thought he went back north."

"It would seem not."

"He's not even an Adventure Society official, is he? I thought he was just an adventurer."

"Perhaps you can ask him in person. I assume you will permit his visit."

"I'm certainly not going to turn him away, which is presumably why the society is using him."

"Miss Warnock asked me to set aside some time so she could speak to you."

"She mentioned there was something she wanted to discuss. Go ahead and find a free moment."

"Very good, Mr Asano. There are quite a number of other social overtures, but nothing that warrants your attention. I will point out that Callum Morse has been making daily requests to talk to you for some time. He briefly started approaching your team members when they were on the job, but Mrs Remore put a stop to that."

"What about others? I know the team isn't telling me everything because they don't want me to feel bad, but they're getting pressured when they're out and about, aren't they?"

"Young Master Geller has made it quite clear that it is nothing they cannot handle."

"And you'll listen to him over me?"

“Of the two of you, Mr Asano, whose judgement would you trust?”

Jason gave Shade a long look.

“Yeah, fair enough.”

Chapter 590

A King Needs a Throne

Rufus had instilled in Jason an appreciation for the fundamentals of training. Since those first days in Greenstone, Jason's life had been storms of activity, followed by downtime for various reasons. Whether it was waiting for the Reaper trials to begin or staying with family in a world that ostensibly lacked magic and monsters, there were periods when Jason was not constantly caught up in the fight.

It was in those times that Jason turned back to the training fundamentals in earnest. While he was in recovery, Jason's body recovered faster than his ability to use his magical abilities in earnest, so he took that time again. He started with meditation, as even with a ravaged body it was something he could easily do. It even seemed to accelerate his recovery a little, to the point that Carlos noticed the difference and strongly encouraged him to continue.

Once his physical state started to improve, Jason turned back to Rufus for guidance once more. With the monster surge winding down, Rufus had moved away from taking contracts in rapid succession and started working with Jason again. The focus of their training had been one of Jason's critical gains during his time away, outside of the growth in power that came from his rank and his essence abilities. It was something that came from the foundations that Rufus had laid with Jason's original training and the harrow experiences Jason had on Earth.

Isolated in a transformation zone, fighting what felt like ceaseless battles, Jason had managed to enter a state known as a combat trance. It was something he had managed to re-enter sporadically since, where all his capabilities were maximised to the limits of his powers and skills. On the flattened roof of the pagoda, Rufus and Jason stood facing one another as Rufus instructed Jason.

"The combat trance is a difficult state to enter. It is two oppositional states of mind, melded into one. It is simultaneously the empty-mind state of meditation, along with the conscious-mind state that can think tactically and strategically."

Jason nodded.

"I've felt that contradiction," he said. "It's why I still struggle to enter that state."

"But you have done it, on far more than one occasion."

"Yes."

"Tell me about those times," Rufus said. "What do they have in common?"

"It was always intense situations where I was vastly outnumbered and pushed to the limits. Sometimes I chose the circumstances because I knew it would push my limits. Sometimes the circumstances chose me."

Rufus nodded.

"What you're describing is very typical. The meditation techniques I taught you, especially the Dance of the Sword Fairy, are designed to prime you for this. But that is only the preparation, and the important part is what comes next. You have to do the work. You have to drive yourself. Only once you have pushed yourself to the limits of your potential can you take that extra step."

"And that's where the pressure comes in."

"Yes. You have to reach a position where you don't have any more to give, then be in a position where you need to give more anyway. Where the only way forward is for your mind to strip away everything you don't need and become completely focused on what you do. To unconsciously act in a conscious manner. Instinctual deliberation."

"We have this concept in my world," Jason said. "We call it effortless action, and it's famously difficult to accomplish. I can only think of one person who had truly accomplished it, and he's a legendary figure, rather than a historical one. I'm told that it's almost impossible until your body has started moving away from the brain as the centre of the mind, which is bronze-rank at least."

"That's the generally accepted wisdom," Rufus said.

"When did you first achieve a combat trance?"

"When I was eighteen."

"Didn't you get essences when you were nineteen?"

"I don't want to talk about that. Tell me about this legendary figure of yours."

"No worries. There's a place called the Hundred Acre Wood..."

The sky was painted in gorgeous sunset colours as Carlos entered the pagoda and he paused, narrowing his eyes.

"It feels different here today. Calmer."

"Mr Asano has spent much of the day in meditation," Shade said, guiding Carlos across the atrium. "He has been achieving better results as he recovers."

"His mood affects the whole building? It's genuinely an extension of his soul, isn't it? And does his soul being a physical manifestation increase the effect?"

“I do hope that you are just curious and not gathering information, Priest Quilido. You have more insight than most into what Mr Asano’s soul is capable of, which means you could prove a danger to him. Also, that you understand the danger he could be to you.”

“I’m not a threat to him, Shade. I’m an ally.”

“You would not be the first ally to come for him, Priest Quilido. They always thought that being higher rank was enough, too.”

“You’re very protective of him,” Carlos said as their platform started ascending.

“Added to his propensity for coming back from the dead, has Jason found the favour of the Reaper?”

“Mr Asano courts no favour. He is true to himself, for good or – more often than I would like – ill.”

The platform carried them all the way to the roof, which had been flattened out compared to the day before. Jason was standing at the edge, looking out not at the sea but inland, over the island. He wasn’t wearing his normal outfits of either smartly tailored tropical-weather suits or garish floral shirts and shorts. He was in simple and loose white clothes; training gear, Carlos guessed, given the two wooden swords resting on the roof beside him.

Jason didn’t turn around at their approach. Shade vanished into Jason’s shadow as Carlos stepped up beside him. He looked out over the island, dotted with little villages. The pagoda was the tallest residence, but the largest was the sprawling royal compound that appeared blurry, as if under a heat-haze shimmer. Carlos knew it was not some meteorological oddity but an observation filter, part of the compound’s protections.

“Rimaros is called the ABC Islands in the other world,” Jason said, not turning his gaze from the vista. “This island is called Aruba, over there. I’ve never been to that world’s version, but I suspect it’s very different, from what I know of it.”

“You said the other world,” Carlos pointed out. “You didn’t say it was your world.”

“Home isn’t where you’re from, Carlos; it’s where you go back to.”

“I suppose it is.”

“You’ve had time with my test results. Am I fully recovered?”

Carlos smiled.

“Yesterday, you were asking me. Today it sounds like you know.”

Jason nodded.

“Thank you, Carlos. I know things were a little rough between us, but I’m glad we moved past that.”

“Your familiar seems less forgiving.”

"Shade is his own person. And it's easier to forgive someone who has wronged you than someone who has wronged the people you cherish. In my experience, anyway."

Shadows danced around Jason, draping themselves over and around him, but it was different to how his cloak had appeared in the past. It was deeper, like an aperture into a bottomless abyss. That changed as stars and nebulas appeared within, not as aspects of the cloak but as if viewed from a great distance. It seemed as if Jason had wrapped himself in a portal to some distant, starry realm. Carlos moved around Jason and his perspective shifted, as Jason's cloak truly was a window into another place.

"Your cloak didn't use to look like that."

"No," Jason said. "looks pretty good though, right?"

"It's... uncomfortable to look at. Uncanny, like you're wearing a hole in reality."

"You know that powers can change appearance, based on their wielders."

"Yes, but those changes say a lot about the people who have them," Carlos said.

"Aren't you worried about what this says about you?"

The cloak dissolved and Jason stepped closer to Carlos.

"And what does it say about me, Carlos?"

"That maybe the people who worrying about you should be."

Jason's smile was that of a snake who found a nest of turtle eggs.

Jason sent an unnerved Carlos away, the pagoda's sloped roof being restored as they descended from it on an elevating platform. After seeing Carlos out, Jason opened a portal for the first time in months, from the atrium to his personal suite on the top floor.

-
- The origin and destination for your portal ability are both within your territory. [Astral Gate] has reset the cooldown of your portal ability.
-

"Huh."

Jason stepped through the portal, feeling the familiar tingle as he touched on the dimensional boundaries of reality.

"Doesn't feel any different."

Jason opened another portal, different to any he had before. Cloud substance rose from the floor, taking the form of an arch before shifting from cloud-stuff to a milky white crystal in which blue and orange light was swirling like liquid in a lava lamp. A curtain of Transcendent light in gold, silver and blue started shimmering in the arch.

Jason's normal portals were an essence ability and allowed him to rapidly move between locations. He had also gained the ability to open a portal to his soul space which, at first, only he and his familiars had been able to enter. But after his soul took on physical properties, others could go in, with a significant restriction. The power he held over anyone who entered his soul space was immense, and their own souls would balk at entry. As such, only those with a profound trust in his good intentions could enter.

The portal Jason had just opened was different. Something about channelling authority through himself, infusing it into the cloud house or probably both, had brought about a fundamental change. He knew that this new arch would admit anyone. He did not know why, or what had changed to allow it, but he could feel it in his soul. Were the people within his soul space somehow protected from him, making it safe for them? Why would the change to his ability do something that seemingly made it weaker?

Jason was contemplating the portal when Dawn alighted on his balcony, her fiery wings vanishing as she walked inside.

"Your ability didn't get weaker," she told him.

"Are you reading my mind?"

"Your spirit realm has changed."

"I'm calling it a soul space now."

"It doesn't matter what you call it. It matters what it is."

"And what is it?"

"You're aware that you share certain things in common with the messengers."

"I am."

"Have you ever wondered who they are the messengers of?"

"I'm wondering now. Is there some kind of super messenger that's going to invade?"

"They won't invade. Not in person. That's what the messengers are for."

"And what's the message?"

"Kneel."

"Oh, that's tremendous. So, who are these people?"

"Astral kings."

"I think I see where this is going. A king needs a throne."

"Yes, they do," Dawn said. "This is why I was concerned about one coming into your possession. Then you went and used that authority. You either fed it into your soul space and it bled out into your cloud flask, or the other way around. Do you even know which it was?"

"I think it started in the flask, but I can't be sure. I wasn't trying to do anything; I was just angry. I'm still not certain what happened."

"It doesn't matter, now. Between the astral throne and the authority, you've established an astral domain that is, I imagine, currently very small. You are an astral king with a very diminutive kingdom."

"You're saying I've bought real estate in the astral?"

"I'm saying you *are* real estate in the astral. You are your domain, Jason."

"I'm not entirely clear on how this works. For one thing, I think we're reaching the limits of using geography as a metaphor for how territory works in the astral. I mean, it's inside me, and it's a real space but it's also in the astral and not a real space. And how is it different from the way it was before? People could already come in."

"Your soul space was still more soul than space. An astral domain is a place. A place that you can shape and control, but as real as the world you were born in."

"If it's an actual place, now can someone break-in?"

"No. It's your soul."

"Can they mess me up if I let them in?"

"No. More than ever, you rule that place. It's even safe for extremely powerful beings to enter, now. Safe for you, anyway. Not so much for them."

"But no gatekeeping with trust anymore?"

"You were signalling an unconscious warning to other souls that to enter was dangerous. That was why the requirement to enter was their trust in you, not yours in them."

"But now, no warning?"

"You are operating on a different scale, now. Volcanos don't warn you not to walk into them. You're expected to figure that out by yourself."

"I'd say blanketing the sky in smoke and ash is a pretty big warning."

"As is blanketing the sky with your soul projection."

"I was unconscious for that, remember. It was really that big?"

"Jason, there is a reason every powerful person in this kingdom is paying very close attention to you right now. What you've been doing, both in public displays and to yourself, are not things of this world. These are things that belong to the cosmos, and the diamond rankers who have travelled it will recognise this."

"Is that why Soramir has always been so nice to me?"

"He has walked the cosmic pathways. He sensed the things in you from the start and recognised, on some level, that you were not a junior but a peer."

“Is that good or bad?”

“It is, perhaps, necessary, given the events in which you are inevitably caught up in.”

Jason sighed.

“There’s more I need to know, isn’t there? Yet again, my soul is doing things I don’t understand. I mean, I know it; it’s my soul. I just don’t understand. It’s like memorising a science textbook without understanding what it means.”

“I will help you, as much as I can. But now you have recovered and I cannot keep putting off my departure. It will be a few more days, at most.”

Jason looked at the archway.

“You could never go in before, could you?”

“No. It would have been dangerous for both of us.”

“But you said extremely powerful beings could go in now.”

“I did.”

He held out his hand for her to take.

“Shall we?”