

Chapter 541

Domain

The moment Humphrey appeared in Jason's spirit realm, he lost the protection of Jason's aura. The artificial aura of the beacon wasn't attacking him, but being so close to its source was like his soul being dangled upside down in a raging river full of razor blades. He dropped the beacon, staggering as he pushed his own aura out to resist, but the extremely powerful, gold-rank device was too strong and too close.

He took one unsteady step and then another. He was stumbling, which should have been quick yet it felt like minutes passed between each one as his soul was scoured. Then another aura surged, pushing back the beacon's aura. It was Jason's aura yet somehow also not, coming not from a person but everywhere around him. Exhausted, Humphrey shakily walked across the gravel path of which he found himself and collapsed onto the nearby grass.

He had arrived at the outer reaches of Jason's spirit domain, emerging from an archway in the high, dark wall. A wide gravel path ran alongside the wall, with gardens on the other side of the path. Humphrey had fallen into a grassy strip between a winding path lined with blood-red flowers and a garden bed of black and white flowers. After sprawling out on his back, he stared up at the blue sky until Jason walked over to loom over him.

"I'm alright," Humphrey said.

"I know."

Jason seemed different from normal, which Humphrey had noticed he sometimes was in the strange realm. His usual frivolity was damped down and his presence became more imposing. Humphrey took the offered hand of his stern-faced friend, who pulled him to his feet.

"How long was it before you can in?" Humphrey asked.

"Just a few seconds," Jason said.

"It felt longer. I'm exhausted."

"When your soul is in the wringer, the passage of time gets very hard to track accurately."

"I guess you'd know," Humphrey said. "Not the most pleasant specialty knowledge to have."

"No," Jason agreed.

Unlike in the outside where Jason had strained himself to shield the group, he now showed no trace of effort. The aura still protecting Humphrey came from the realm around

him, yet it was definitely Jason's aura. Or a more powerful version of it, which was an intimidating concept. The pair looked at the beacon, still where Humphrey had dropped it. It was similar to an orrery, with various crystals connected via metal rods. Humphrey dropping it had inflicted no damage, nor had the fall impeded its operation. Humphrey could faintly sense the aura it was producing, thrashing against the aura suppressing it like a frenzied animal in a cage.

"It's powerful," Humphrey said. "Can this place contain it safely?"

"It's powerful on the outside," Jason said. "In here, it's nothing."

Humphrey felt an oppressive power and looked turned to look behind them. In the far-off centre of the realm loomed the ominous dark tower. In the air above the tower was the nebula eye; a monumental replica of the eye of Jason's familiar. As well as Jason's own eyes.

In Jason's otherworldly realm it was hard to judge distance, or perhaps distance was not the same fixed constant it was outside. The tower was unquestionably far away and the eye was directly above it, yet Humphrey was filled with certainty that the eye was somehow much closer. Despite the amorphous nature of it, being an eye-shaped cloud, Humphrey could tell that it was looking directly at the beacon.

An aura pressed down from the eye onto the device, Humphrey feeling only peripheral contact with the eye's projected aura. Like the aura shielding him, it was Jason's aura but also not. This one was even more powerful, being far more vast and mysterious. Observing the aura projected by the eye was like looking into the water from a boat and glimpsing a fraction of a leviathan whose true vastness remained hidden in the depths.

The impact of the eye's aura on that of the beacon was immediate. Like a clockmaker disassembling a timepiece, the eye started taking the aura apart. One of the small outer crystals exploded, throwing out tiny shards. Most aura interactions were invisible, but with the explosion of the crystal, the beacon's aura started spilling into the visible spectrum. White lights started popping like fireworks over the beacon, then blue and orange light appeared as well. This was the aura of the eye rendered visible; a devouring cloud consuming the white lights. The white lights were broken into rainbow colours, as if refracting through a crystal, before vanishing.

More crystals exploded, producing more and more of the white lights, yet the blue and orange cloud had no trouble consuming them all. With every light that was turned into a rainbow before vanishing, the aura of the beacon grew weaker.

"What's going on in there?" Sophie's voice came through Jason's party interface.

"We're handling with the beacon," Jason said. "Stay out there. We'll come out when it's dealt with."

"Voice chat works in here?" Humphrey asked.

"It's something I've been working on," Jason explained as they continued to watch the beacon's aura being devoured. "I've seen a lot of astral spaces, astral proto-spaces and the transformation zones I told you about. Most of them block any form of communication, be that my party interface or even Shade communicating with his own bodies. Some allow it, though, and I've been unravelling the process by which that works. It's less a matter of power and more about understanding, although a certain threshold of power is necessary."

"Are you saying you can use your party interface across dimensional boundaries?"

"Only with my spirit realm," Jason said. "I'm looking to expand the utility going forward but I still have a lot to learn about astral magic."

They continued to watch, Humphrey growing more uneasy at the concept of auras having component pieces. The potential revelations of what that meant for the soul were troubling.

"It's not a real aura," Jason said, despite Humphrey not asking. "False auras, like the motive spirit of a monster or a false aura from devices like this are actually magical projections, not soul projections. The most powerful being in the cosmos couldn't take apart your aura like this unless you were stupid enough to let them into your soul where they could strip-mine it."

As they watched, the larger and more central crystals were exploding. The cloud continued to consume the resulting lights. Finally, the large central crystal erupted into fragmented shards, many of which were flung in the direction of Jason and Humphrey. Humphrey conjured his dragon wings to shield them but the fragments stopped in the air as if they had struck an invisible gelatin wall and become embedded. They drifted back and fell onto the gravel, becoming inert.

Finally, all that remained of the beacon was the brass and silver rods that had connected the now-annihilated crystals, along with shard piles that had once been the crystals. Jason looked at them and the shards and rods all started to melt. Once they were nothing more than liquid pooled on the gravel, they seeped into the ground like water into dry earth.

Jason was looking at the spot the beacon had been with a grim frown.

"Jason, is everything alright?"

Jason looked up absently, distracted from his thoughts.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. No worries, mate. You should be able to contact Liara, now."

Humphrey did just that, quickly briefing the expedition leader. He glossed over the details of the beacon's destruction and focused on the group's postulation that the Purity worshippers were likely after the clockwork kings. Liara thanked Humphrey, directing their group to join the search for the missing adventurers, for which Jason's expansive aura should be helpful.

"We should go and regroup with the others and get moving," Humphrey told Jason. Jason nodded, still looking distracted.

"Are you sure you're alright, Jason?"

"I'm fine."

"It would make sense if destroying that thing exhausted you. We can stop to rest if you need it."

"No," Jason said. "It wasn't much of an effort."

"It did seem easy enough," Humphrey said. "if you don't mind, though, I could use a rest myself. It was only a couple of seconds, but being in that thing's aura felt like much longer."

"Of course."

Jason turned to gesture at a simple park bench that definitely hadn't been there before. He and Humphrey sat, Humphrey looking at his friend with concern. Jason was different in this place. The vast and powerful aura permeating it wasn't Jason's exactly but it also was. His aura power, Hegemon, always felt imposing when evoked; a sense that had only grown as Jason's soul went through change after change.

Humphrey's aura was likewise domineering, but his was the aura of a dragon: the natural ruler of wherever he happened to be standing. Jason's was more like a celestial law. His aura power came from the sin essence and, when projected, made the people within it feel as if Jason himself was the arbiter of right and wrong. The power of his aura essence reflected this, imposing a sin affliction on anyone that attacked Jason or his allies. To act against Jason within his domain was a sin and was punished accordingly. The sin afflictions that his aura power inflicted could not be resisted.

When Jason was just another silver ranker, even with his aura possessing the strength it did, that was one thing. But in this place, Jason felt like a god. Even if the power felt nothing but benevolent to them, it left the team with a sense of unease each time they experienced it. The comparison to divinity was one Humphrey had subconsciously avoided, despite the obviousness of it, but it was no longer a comparison he could avoid. The beacon had been a gold-rank artefact, and not a lesser one. Jason's power in this realm was extremely abnormal.

Humphrey looked around at the spirit realm before his gaze settled on the giant eye above the tower. It looked no different than it had before, yet Humphrey felt certain it was no longer looking in their direction. Unlike Clive, Humphrey had never discussed with Jason the nature of the spirit realm after realising it was no ordinary dimensional realm power.

"Jason, that thing was far too powerful to just destroy safely."

"Yes."

"But not here."

"No."

"What is this place?"

Jason looked at Humphrey for a long moment, then nodded to himself.

"It's a combination of factors," Jason said. "It started out as a power evolution for my storage space that created a realm where only myself and my familiars could enter. Then, after my body and soul went from dual-natured to a gestalt, the now physical nature of my soul changed it. Other people could enter. Under certain conditions."

"Conditions?"

"Other people's souls will instinctively recognise the power I will have over them here. Unless they trust me completely, they'll be boxed out. Even if they want to risk it, their souls won't let them. They can't be forced in, even by themselves, any more than they can be into a hostile portal."

Humphrey's eyes went wide as an important puzzle piece fell into place.

"That was why you were so emotional after we came here," he said. "And why you waited so long to show us. We'd been wondering."

Jason nodded.

"There's another factor," Jason said. "The ability evolved a second time."

"Like mine."

"Not exactly," Jason said. "You came by your second evolution honestly. Mine was triggered by significant external forces."

"What kind of forces?"

"I was more or less using my soul as a lever to force a gap in reality shut. I was in a place where reality was so in flux that it altered me to make that possible. It was a side effect that let me do... certain things."

"You can't tell me?"

"Probably best if I didn't. The practical effects are that it increases my power and presence in places that are connected to my soul."

"Like the cloud house," Humphrey realised. "It's why it always feels like you're there."

"Yes," Jason said, then a mischievous smile teased at his lips. "I've done my best to tamp that down while you and Sophie are sharing private moments."

Humphrey went stiff but was happy at the same time to see Jason's face return from sombre to its normal impishness.

"So, this place is connected to your soul?" Humphrey asked. "Is that how you're so powerful here?"

"This is my soul," Jason said. "I am all-powerful, here. Since I gained my spirit domain power – which I'll ask you not to talk about outside of here or the cloud house – I don't think anything could harm me here."

"This is your soul? We're inside your soul right now?"

"Yes."

Humphrey felt like he should be incredulous but it instead made complete sense. Suddenly the strange feeling he had every time he came into Jason's spirit realm made much more sense.

"You said you're all-powerful, here? That's how you destroyed the beacon?"

"When others first became able to enter, I didn't have the spirit domain power and was only bronze rank. Dawn speculated that a diamond-ranker might be able to resist my influence, here. Now, I don't think anything can. I'm pretty sure that if anyone tries to implant a star seed in me now, I can just let them and annihilate the thing once it's here. Maybe even wipe the owner's control and absorb it for my own use."

"The way you did with that bridge and door you told us about."

"Yes. I tried to do something similar with this beacon but it was too weak and crude to endure the process. It didn't maintain enough integrity to be absorbed as it broke down."

"So, now you have leftover bits of beacon in your soul? Is there a magic mop for that?"

Jason burst into a laugh.

"You don't need to worry about the residue affecting me. This place will digest it like food to strengthen my spiritual defences."

Humphrey looked at his friend, remembering the carefree man he met in a waiting room of the Greenstone Adventure Society. Jason's smile was still there but there was a heaviness to it. The smile was genuine but Humphrey didn't think Jason would ever have the lightness of the past.

"We all take on burdens as we go through life," Jason said. "It gets heavier for everyone."

“Can you read my mind, here?” Humphrey asked.

“No,” Jason said. “I can read your face. You should avoid playing cards for money.”

“That’s not what Belinda told me.”

“She took all your money?”

“Sophie made her stop. Eventually.”

“Are you two coming back out?” Sophie asked through voice chat. “Didn’t Liara tell us to get moving? I’m starting to get a little jealous.”

Humphrey frowned at Jason in confusion. “Jealous?”

“She sees the chemistry,” Jason said, pointing back and forth between himself and Humphrey. “I’d totally ship us.”

“What does a boat have to do with it?”

Jason shook his head.

“Oh, Hump.”

“Don’t call me Hump.”

Chapter 542

Portal Logistics

Suffering the full effects of the aura beacon for only a few moments had left Humphrey spiritually exhausted, but by the time he finished talking with Jason, he was ready to get back into action. While Humphrey knew his silver-rank recovery attribute was part of his rapid restoration, he suspected that Jason's spirit realm was also somehow contributing.

Translating the power and potential that every soul contained was the entire purpose of absorbing essences and advancing through the ranks. In Jason's spirit realm, however, there was no need for translation; Jason had the power on tap. Humphrey guessed that Jason utilised some of that power to help him, but he didn't ask if that was the case. Given that they were inside Jason's soul, the intimacy and trust of that act left Humphrey unsure if he'd be disappointed to just be imagining it.

As soon as Humphrey and Jason stepped out of the spirit realm, Jason spread his aura out to its fullest extent. He sensed the expedition's gold-rankers doing the same, searching for the captured adventurers. They were also looking for the Purity loyalists who they suspected to be going for the clockwork kings, meaning they were likely underground already.

Jason had a variety of voice chat options and he opened a private channel for himself and the gold-rankers, Jana and Liara. They had the strongest aura senses by far and could coordinate their searches.

"I'm sensing something underground," Liara said. "It's muffled but that makes sense. If the clockwork kings weren't shielded from aura detection somehow, they would have been found in earlier sweeps of the island."

"I'm not picking up any auras I recognise from the expedition members," Jason said, "but I've touched on what I think might be a suppressed aura. It would make sense that they're using suppression collars."

"You can sense suppressed auras?" Jana asked.

"Dealing with aura suppression is kind of my thing," Jason said. "I'm only sensing one suppressed aura, though. It's possible that they split up the prisoners."

"That makes sense," Liara said. "The battle became very spread out and a handful of Purity worshippers managed to escape with captives. It makes sense that they scattered."

“As I said, I’m only picking up on one aura,” Jason told her. “The others are too far for my senses to pick up or dead. They may have already escaped the island. That one suppressed aura is moving in the direction of the shore.”

“It looks like those vehicles they arrived in left while the beacon was active,” Liara said. “The scout teams watching the island managed to capture one of them but the rest slipped away. They’re almost impossible to detect while under the water. They will likely return just long enough to extract their people.”

Switching from the private channel to the team leader channel, Liara directed Jason’s group to intercept the potential captive he had sensed. She would take a group and look for a path into the underground while Jana was in charge of searching for the remaining captives.

“Jason,” Humphrey said. “Those people you sensed. They’re heading for the shore?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Probably going to meet one of their magic submarines.”

“Let’s see if we can’t get ahead of them, then.”

“No worries.”

While portals were considered the most useful of all utility powers, the logistics of their use had always posed issues for adventurers. Along with range, portals had two critical limitations, the first of which was the need to have been to a portal destination. The other issue was the number and power of people who could use them. Jason was able to portal five silver-rankers and Clive four, while Humphrey could teleport up to three people in addition to himself. Fortunately, familiars didn’t add to that burden.

Jason knew that his spiritual realm wasn’t a workaround, as the people hidden away in his soul still consumed the portal’s energy. With his full team in there, his portal would fail as soon as he tried to step through it.

Humphrey and Clive had developed routines to work around these limitations, incorporating Jason after they were reunited. Until they further ranked up their powers they had to be creative with their portal logistics. Fortunately, their team had the unusual advantage of multiple abilities, allowing them to go through a process that was a little complicated but got the job done.

It started with Clive entering Jason’s spirit realm. Belinda went with him, although only Clive was essential. Humphrey and Jason then flew into the air; Humphrey with draconic wings and Jason on wings of night. From the air, they had a better perspective on the island than even the tallest building offered. Their silver-rank visual acuity was excellent but not telescopic, so Humphrey pulled out a non-magical telescope.

This was a trick that Humphrey had picked up from Jason for extending the line-of-sight range of short-range teleportation, which had no cooldown. Humphrey picked out a spot in the direction Jason pointed and teleported himself and Jason there. With Clive and Belinda in Jason realm, that was Humphrey's full capacity.

Clive and Belinda emerged at their destination, which was the top of a building overlooking the walls around the edge of the city. Clive and Jason both opened portals to the place they had just left the group, allowing the rest to come through with capacity for one person to spare.

Much of the city wall had collapsed, giving access to the water via piles of rubble making rough ramps. Humphrey had chosen the spot because a relatively convenient water access point was nearby, making it a likely rendezvous point for the enemy with their transport.

Jason had already withdrawn his aura before being teleported. With his broad search, there was no question that their quarry had sensed his attentions but there was no need to advertise the fact that they had moved into the path of the enemy. It wouldn't be hard to sense their group, but they didn't want to alert the Purity worshippers too early. The others all retracted their auras as well, but they were not stealth specialists and would only remain hidden outside a certain range.

"I'm going to go scout them out," Jason said. By reducing the range of his own senses he would be able to track the enemy without being noticed himself unless they had their own aura-strength anomaly like Jason.

The two silver-rank members of the Order of Redeeming Light, Rhett and Jaime, were frogmarching their collared, gagged and hooded prisoner through the sloped and broken streets. Moving with the prisoner had slowed them down and when the beacon coverage dropped they hadn't yet escaped the island.

"I'm telling you, Sendira is using us as decoys," Jaime said. "We got screwed going along with this."

"You think I don't know?" Rhett asked.

"She was lying to our faces."

"Doesn't matter. We're in it, now. All we can do is ride it out to the end."

"At least take the hood off the prisoner. We'll move faster if he's not stumbling along the whole time."

"She said to keep the hood on."

“Because she wants us to get caught. The idea is that when something goes wrong because she didn’t think it through, it all comes down on our heads. The transport might not even be waiting for us.”

“That’s unfortunate,” a voice said from behind them and they both whirled around. A man was standing only a few metres from them, having gotten closer than should have been possible. He wore blood-red combat robes and a cloak so dark it seemed less like fabric than a void wrapped around him. Inside the deep hood was a pair of strange eyes eerily watching them.

They couldn’t sense any aura from the man. Their eyes told them he was real but their other senses said he was not, leading to an unnerving dissonance. They couldn’t even smell him, which their silver-rank olfactory senses certainly should have. There were several potential reasons for the disconnect. One was a stealth specialist while another was a projected illusion. Then there was the worst-case scenario.

“I’m not a gold-ranker,” Jason assured them. “My name is Jason Asano.”

The two Purity worshippers stirred.

“You’re the one the Builder wants dead,” Jaime said. “We were told you were on the island.”

“We were told to kill you if we got the chance,” Rhett added.

“Here you are, then,” Jason. “It’s your lucky day.”

Jaime and Rhett shared a look, both of their expressions flashing uncertainty.

“Why does the Builder want to kill you?”

“He tried to take my soul one time, so I took this astral space of his. Well, someone else took it first and I stopped him from taking it back. It’s all a bit complicated. That’s even before the magic door I stole, which is a whole other thing. Are you blokes familiar with multiverse theory?”

Jason pushed the hood back off his head, revealing his face.

“Look,” he told them. “We could fight. I’m pretty sure that would go badly for you, but you have a hostage, so who knows? But you seem like good, clean-living blokes. Maybe we could make a deal.”

“What kind of deal?” Rhett asked.

Jaime turned to glare at him.

“What?” Rhett asked. “We should at least hear him out.”

“Definitely not,” Jaime said.

“Why not?”

“We’re part of the church of Purity.”

“And whose fault is that?” Rhett asked. “Hey, Rhett, let's give up the amphora business and join the church of religious crackpottery.”

“That is not how I described it.”

“Well, you should have.”

“I know that now. But we're in it, and this guy is definitely not pure.”

“Well, I don't care. Do you want to fight him? I'm willing to bet he has a half-dozen friends stashed nearby, too.”

“Then why would he make a deal?”

“Maybe he finds us intimidating.”

“Yeah, I bet spooky blood-robe guy finds us terrifying.”

“Well, maybe if someone let me wear my pointy hat.”

“That hat is not intimidating.”

“It is so. And it's magical.”

“It stores beverages!”

“Well, he didn't know that!” Rhett said, gesturing at Jason. That was when they realised that Jason was no longer there.

“Where did he go?”

They looked around and realised that not only had Jason vanished while they were arguing, but so had their prisoner.

“How did he do that?”

“The tricky part was some very delicate aura suppression to see if I could gradually remove the prisoner from their perception without them noticing while they were distracted,” Jason said.

The prisoner, de-hooded and ungagged, was being treated by Neil.

“And you just let them go?” Sophie asked Jason.

“I bet you left something behind, though, didn't you?” Belinda asked.

Jason flashed a grin.

“There's a pretty good chance someone will spot the Shade bodies in their shadows, but they don't have any gold-rankers. We might be able to learn something useful before that point.”

“You aren't worried about your familiar being caught?” asked Carlos, the leader of the other adventuring team.

“One of the most valuable aspects of my excess bodies is that they are quite expendable,” Shade said, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “The ability to send them into dangerous places is quite valuable.”

“I made the mistake of not using Shade to scout the dangerous places in the past,” Jason explained. “When Shade and I had only just started working together, me and the team found ourselves standing over what we later discovered was a massive hidden base for the Purity church and the Builder cult. I let myself be talked out of scouting it out and didn’t understand the extent of Shade’s remarkable abilities yet. I don’t want to make that mistake again.”

In the depths under the city, Sendira, Fila and Ramona were in the massive forge room. In front of them was a pair of subdued clockwork kings, the device Sendira brought to control them having worked precisely as intended.

“What now?” Ramona asked. “The aura shielding on this chamber is probably damaged and not fully hiding us. Even if it is, the gold-rankers will sense us the moment we leave it. They have to be looking, now the beacon is down.”

“Yes,” Sendira agreed. “The likelihood of their having realised our objective is high.”

“Even if Ramona digs us a path out that the adventurers can’t follow,” Fila said, “our chances of escaping this island with gold-rankers coming after us are as good as nil. What great plan does Melody have for getting us out of here? Or didn’t she think things through this far?”

“As a matter of fact,” Sendira said, “she did.”

Sendira led them to the chamber doors and outside the aura shielding the room provided. The clockwork kings lumbered behind them. In the hallway outside, Sendira took out a small magical object; a silver pyramid small enough to rest in her hand. She set it on the ground and twisted the top of the pyramid to remove it. Inside was a crystal that started glowing silver-blue when Sendira touched a finger to it.

As Sendira replaced the cap over the crystal, a powerful false aura was projected from the pyramid. The aura beacon was nothing like the one that had blanketed the island, being far less powerful and not disrupting other auras.

“Great,” Ramona said. “Your plan is to make it easier for the gold-ranker to find us.”

“No,” Fila said, looking at the device. “I know what that is.”

“What is it?” Ramona asked.

“It’s a portal beacon,” Fila said. “All portal abilities have different secondary effects. Some can target portals in places they’ve never been, so long as there is an aura-based target marker to home in on.”

“The only portal user we have in our branch of the order can’t do that,” Ramona pointed out. “We also don’t have a gold-ranker strong enough to portal these clockwork kings.”

A portal flared into being and Sendira ordered the clockwork kings to move through it. “Fortunately,” Sendira said, “Melody is not as short-sighted as you.”

Chapter 543

It Won't Be a Good Reason

The Sea of Storms has no shortage of small, uninhabited islands. One such island was a small scrap of land that was periodically scoured by the magical storms that passed through the region, striping the land bare except for a gully where hardy magical plants had managed to hold on.

The plant life that survived was not particularly exceptional. Examples of all of it could be found throughout the Sea of Storms, frequently being cultivated in specialty farms. What it did do, though, in the jungle-filled gully on the otherwise barren island, was make anything going on inside very difficult to detect. When operating anywhere even remotely close to Rimaros, this was a valuable asset. The senses of gold-rankers were bad enough, but with diamond-rankers active, any slip could be costly.

Three people were standing in the gully, one of which was a gold-ranker, Esteban Galo. The others were Melody and Laront, the leadership of the Order of redeeming Light's Sea of Storms contingent.

"Your name is Laront and his name is Laurent?" Galo asked. "I can see that becoming confusing."

"Best he's not here, then," Melody said.

"His real name isn't Laurent; he chose that to annoy me," Laront told him. "He wasn't fool enough to use my actual name, but it's close enough. Just call him Killian or, better yet, make this the end of your dealings with him. He has a habit of using, exploiting and betraying the people he works with or for."

"Then why do you work with him?"

"Because he is my brother."

"You're a human and he's an elf."

"My father was an elf and my mother a human. The church of Fertility allowed them to have children and I was fortunate enough that my father's impurity was purged to produce me. They went in the other direction for my brother, with predictable results."

"I thought he looked like that because of some power he had. You're saying it's because he's an elf?"

"Killian's failings are many and they are painted on his face," Laront said. "Where is he, now?"

“Early in the monster surge, something spooked him enough that he paid very well to leave the Sea of Storms. He specifically asked me not to tell you where and, since he’s the one paying for this, I won’t.”

Laront nodded.

“He always had a knack for finding what fed specific appetites,” Laront mused, triggering a flash of unhappiness on Galo’s expression.

“My apologies,” Laront said. “I meant no offence.”

“I just want it done,” Galo said. “The Adventure Society has every portal specialist on a tight leash, so it took considerable concessions to make this possible.”

Melody and Laront shared a wary look. An unhappy gold-ranker could go very poorly for them. Gold-rankers weren’t used to having their activities monitored, let alone controlled. There were exceptions, such as the Sapphire Crown guild that worked directly for the royal family, but even their gold-rankers were used to a rich amount of liberty. Even in a monster surge, gold-rankers were rarely impinged upon as they were leaders who themselves knew best how to contribute. There were some abilities, however, that were too useful to not make the most efficient use of during a monster surge. Portal powers were at the top of that list.

The logistical issues that made portals trouble for teams like Jason’s meant that gold-rank portal users were at an absolute premium. Monster surges meant that rapid deployment of forces was frequently critical, allowing entire silver-rank expeditions to be deployed at need. Compared to that, a silver-rank portal user could only deploy bronze-rankers in force, frequently unable to portal even their own teams in their entirety.

Silver-rankers who didn’t have portal abilities close to reaching gold were more frequently employed to deliver critical resources. This was especially true for those who, like Jason and Clive, also had storage powers. While dimensional bags generally didn’t count against portal capacity, too many of them passing through could sometimes destabilise a portal.

The two Purity worshippers were fully aware that Galo was not exaggerating his difficulties. Not only did he need to carve out the time to help them but also do so without anyone tracking his activities. Doing all that for members of their church was a significant risk for him, which spoke to just what Killian had offered the man for his service.

Laront had no idea what price his brother had paid to convince Galo to aid the church of Purity. He only knew what Killian had asked of Laront in return for doing so; a price that came as a surprise. Laront and Melody were ambivalent about the Builder’s desire to have Asano killed, but Laront’s brother wanting the same thing was a different matter.

The alliance with the Builder was rapidly coming apart, with neither side showing any particular malice or care. While the monster surge had already gone longer than some and showed little sign of abating, it would continue only for a handful of weeks more, perhaps a couple of months at most. With that the Builder forces would retreat to the astral, having plundered what they could over the course of their invasion.

At that point, the Builder's interest in Pallimustus would be over while the god of Purity's preparations would finally come into the light. The aftermath of the combined monster surge and Builder invasion would see Pallimustus at its weakest, which would be Purity's time to rise.

The Builder cult likewise had little more use for the Purity worshippers. If they managed to kill Asano, that was all well and good. If not, Purity's worshippers taking the clockwork kings was already the greater transgression. It would be far from the first time one had taken from the other, going back to the Builder's own attempts to kill Jason.

An entire contingent of Purity priests had been defiled by clockwork cores, turning them into converted. It wasn't even the only instance of the Builder using his allies in this way. The cannibalistic nature of Purity and the Builder's alliance was why Melody had not hesitated to seize the clockwork kings.

Compared to the Builder's absent ire, the ill-will of Killian or the gold-ranker they were dealing with would be a more pointed threat. Killian might only be silver rank, but the way he wormed into the grimmest corners made him a nebulous threat if he turned on them – which he certainly would, should it benefited him. Unfortunately, Laront had needed those connections.

Oddly, Galo was the lesser threat. They were less concerned with his gold-rank power than with what he would tell the authorities if connected to the order. Galo's necessity to reliably extracting the clockwork king's had forced Melody and Laront to let him see more of their operation than they liked. Nonetheless, they had taken what precautions they were able to.

They were not foolish enough to fully expose themselves. Their current location was part of their diligence in containing information. Even what members of the order knew was carefully controlled. That had led to an amount of dissatisfaction with the current leadership, but that was an issue Melody had been working on for some time. The operation on the island that was once the Builder's flying city was the culmination of those efforts.

Melody and Laront both felt relief when the aura beacon signal in Galo's hand started glowing and he opened a portal. Two clockwork kings duck through it, followed by Sendira, Fila and Ramona.

"Who is this?" Ramona demanded, looking at Galo. He focused his gaze and gold rank aura on her and she wilted. Laront handed him an envelope and he walked away, toward one end of the gully. Melody led the others in the opposite direction.

One of Shade's bodies was able to navigate the underground much better than Jason, his insubstantial form easily circumventing obstructions. He eventually arrived outside the forge chamber and Jason shadow-jumped through him. Shade vanished into Jason's shadow as he walked into the chamber. Liara was already inside, looking around at the operations that carried on, uncaring of the intruder's presence. Jason walked up to stand beside her.

"The other prisoner freed herself?" Liara asked. The aura blocking of the chamber made Jason's communication power spotty, so Liara only had the basics of the ongoing operation.

"The Purity worshippers who took her were badly injured when they got away," Jason told her. "Some constructs stumbled onto them while they were waiting to rendezvous with one of their extraction vehicles and she got away while they were fighting. She managed to get the hood off her head but she was still collared. All she could do was run until Jana found her."

"And no sign of the other one?"

"Actually, one of the teams has a good tracker. He was able to find where they boarded one of their vessels. Signs are that he was still alive at the time."

"Which of the prisoners was it?" Liara asked.

"Gibson Amouz."

"Dammit. That's my husband's cousin. He's capable enough but has something of a courage problem. His father has been pushing him during the monster surge to toughen him up."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not like I'd be happy, whoever it was. The thing I wanted above all else was to not lose anyone."

"They want him alive for a reason. It won't be a good reason, but it's better than dead."

"And if they do whatever it is they do to purify things to him?"

“Then he’ll be properly messed up,” Jason said. “But you can come back from properly messed up. There’s a guy in our group, Carlos. He’s leader of the other team you paired us with, but he got me thinking about another Carlos I know. He’s a priest of the Healer that specialises in soul damage. Works with people who had star seeds shoved into them. He helped dig me out of the kind of hole not everyone escapes, even though I was kind of a prick to him. If there’s a way back from whatever the Order of the Redeeming Light does to people, someone like him either knows it or is our best chance at figuring it out.”

Liara turned her gaze from the industrial processes still working to produce constructs and looked at Jason. After a moment, she nodded.

“I’ll look into that,” she said.

“So, what about all this, then?” Jason asked, gesturing broadly at the room around them. “You want me to do the trashing? I have a familiar with resonating force beams that’ll slice this place up like baklava. I’d appreciate you handling the clockwork king if it pulls itself together, though. It looks like they used it for parts, but its aura is still intact, if a bit all over the place.”

“The Magic Society will want to study this place and the clockwork king.”

“I say we trash it anyway. They won’t research anything in here fast enough to help before the Builder conflict comes to an end. The Builder is done in the Storm Kingdom anyway, making this place a horror factory that some prick will want to exploit. Let’s destroy it and go work on getting your cousin-in-law back”

Liara stared at the room for a long moment before nodding.

Another uninhabited island in the Sea of Storms was an unremarkable mountain jutting out of the water, little more than a rocky hill. Beneath the surface of the water, however, was a submerged tunnel leading into a complex hollowed out of the mountain. The interior proved that the unremarkable, uninhabited exterior was a lie.

A vessel looking like a flat whale moved through the tunnel and surfaced at a large submarine dock, alongside several identical vessels. The bow of the vessel opened up and Melody walked out onto a ramp, followed by Laront and Sendira. They were trailed by the two clockwork kings, with Ramona and Fila bringing up the rear. For an internal space, the submarine dock was very large, with a lot of open space currently going unused. The facility was designed for a much larger force than the Order of Redeeming Light currently possessed.

There was a large group of order members assembled at the top of the ramp; a rare convergence of the various cells the order normally scattered across the region. They were gathered into clusters by group, Ramona and Fila hurrying to join their own people. They were each the second-in-command of their cells and immediately started reporting to their leaders underneath privacy screens.

Standing next to Melody, Sendira looked around the leaders of each cell, no few of whom were looking at Melody. Their gazes ranged from assessing and reserved to overtly hostile. Melody, for her part, was casually talking with Laront while directing some of her own people to take away the clockwork kings with the device Sendira handed over.

Four of the leaders shared looks and stepped forward, approaching Melody. She turned to face them, her expression unconcerned and slightly confused. Her once silver hair and eyes were now white and pale grey; human colours instead of the celestine ones she'd been born with. Those eyes narrowed with wariness as she addressed the other cell leaders.

“Is there something you'd like to discuss?”

Chapter 544

Bait and Switch

Hidden inside a mountain was the Order of Redeeming Light's submarine dock. There was a rare gathering of the order's local forces and four of the cell leaders were confronting their overall leader, Melody Jain, in front of everyone. She looked slightly confused as she looked at the other leaders. Her second in command, Sendira, stood beside her, as did the church representative to the order, Laront. Melody addressed the cell leaders.

"Caitlyn. Heston. Marika. Elise. Is there something you have to say?"

"We need to discuss the direction you are taking operations here in the Sea of Storms," Marika said.

"I assume your intention is to congratulate me for the success of the operation," Melody said. "Two clockwork kings in our possession and a clean extraction."

"Clean?" Marika asked, her expression incredulous. "We spent years establishing secure locations and infrastructure within the Sea of Storms, without the Storm Kingdom ever catching wind of us. Months developing operational readiness, all in preparation for the monster surge. Once it began, we worked painstakingly to suborn fortress towns and the essence users they contained so they could become purified converted. You just sacrificed two-thirds of that force and exposed the scope and nature of our operations in the course of a single day. And don't tell us this was about the clockwork kings. You only found out about them chasing after your daughter."

Anger crossed the face of Melody's second, Sendira, but Melody gestured her to silence before she spoke.

"That is only the beginning," Heston said, jumping into the gap left as Sendira failed to defend her leader. "Every cell here lost people today. Every one."

"Including my own," Melody said. "Sacrifices must be made."

"You think that losing your own people inspires confidence in your leadership?" Elise asked.

"I am the leader," Melody said. "This position was assigned to me. Your confidence should be in that. Or do you doubt the wisdom of the church's leadership?"

"We have been here for a long time," Caitlyn said. "Away from the church's eyes, we are concerned that you have lost sight of the true path."

"I am the church's eyes," Laront said. "Are you suggesting that I have been blinded?"

"We all know that you and Melody work very closely together," Heston said. "Perhaps that closeness has caused you to lose the perspective that a little distance would offer."

Laront narrowed his eyes.

"Be extremely cautious about the accusations you make," he warned. "Your soul belongs to Purity, but the means by which it comes to him remains an open question."

"Are you threatening me, priest?"

"Yes. Never forget that you were filth that I picked up, washed off and gave the privilege of serving the most pure. If you want to be returned to the garbage pile, I can quite readily have you chopped up and composted."

"Boy's," Melody said in the lightly scolding tone of a mother almost, but not quite at the limits of her tolerance. "Whatever contention there is between us, remember that we are ultimately one, under the pure god. We might disagree inside, but the enemies are outside."

Despite having stepped forward to challenge Melody, Caitlyn, Elise and Marika all nodded their agreement. Looking slightly sheepish, Laront and Heston took both a literal and figurative step back.

"Now," Melody said. "Since there seems to be tension born of dissatisfaction with how this operation has been conducted, let's discuss it and see if we cannot clear the air. Firstly, I would like to address the issue of expending the lives of our members and the bulk of the pure converted on this operation. The loss of order members is, of course, unfortunate. It is, however, an unfortunate necessity."

"So you say," Caitlyn said. "This operation was reckless."

"The operation was essential," Melody said. "If our goal was to collect a small force of pure converted, we would have taken them and left already. Do you truly believe that the years, people and resources the order has poured into this region are worth a paltry contingent of cannon fodder?"

Caitlyn met Melody's gaze, but not steadily.

"Of course not," she said.

"Our goal," Melody announced to the group at large, "is not to collect a small force or even to build an army. It is to give the church the means to not just build an army but to keep building armies. This world is unclean. So unclean that we have been forced to work with a taint like the Builder just to prepare it for cleansing. The challenges ahead are great and our enemies overwhelming. We cannot hedge our bets or take half measures. Only boldness can light this world's path out of the darkness."

Melody gestured at the clockwork kings.

"These are the key. The answer to what brought us here and the next step forward. They are worth more than any number of pure converted. And yes, they are worth some of our lives. All of our lives, if that sacrifice delivers a weapon to our god that will help him purify this world. We had only one chance to seize this key and that is exactly what we did. What we have achieved today came at a cost, yes, but it is the price of triumph."

"These are all very fine ideals," Marika said, "but are you truly holding to them, Melody? We didn't find out about the clockwork kings because we were looking for them. What we were looking for was a way to get our hands on was your daughter and only stumbled on news of the kings because she was going after them. Would you have risked raiding the island if she wasn't there?"

"I would," Melody said. "My daughter's presence was irrelevant."

"Is that so?" Elise asked. "Then why was almost half of our force on the island pushed into a confrontation to snatch her and bring her back? The most costly conflict, all for one person."

"Things are not as you say they are," Melody said, although her voice lacked its previous certainty, emboldening her challengers.

"You can say what you like," Heston said, "but words are easy. The proof is in your actions. So many of our forces have failed to return, but your daughter is being carried to us as we speak."

One of the submarines surfaced at the dock and Heston laughed.

"Perfect timing," he said. "Let us see the degree to which Melody places her desires over the order's ideals."

The front of the submarine opened up and voices emerged, mid-conversation.

"...just a piece of cardstock with information printed on it, folded into thirds. It's a great way of efficiently disseminating information and you can print a bunch of them cheaply."

"And some guy from Vitesse gave it to you?"

"Yeah, he was hunting some energy vampire. I have no idea how someone like that got involved in the amphora business..."

Rhett and Jaime came wandering out of the submarine, onto the ramp that led up to the dock platform. They stopped, their conversation trailing off as they noticed all the people staring at them.

"Uh, hey boss," Rhett said. "Um, that Asano guy took our prisoner."

"He was really sneaky," Jaime added.

Sendira pinched the bridge of her nose, letting out a quiet groan.

"You lost her daughter?" Heston asked incredulously.

"Her?" Jaime said. "We grabbed a guy. What's this about a—"

"That's enough," Melody told them. "Just go join the others."

Rhett and Jaime awkwardly made their way up the ramp, under the gaze of the order's leadership. They joining the rank and file of Melody's cell, standing off to the side.

"I'm afraid you got the wrong vessel," Sendira told Heston. "The vessel containing our primary target was directed to take extra precautions in returning to the dock, so it will be the last to arrive."

There was an awkward silence amongst the leaders as they waited for the last vessel to arrive. Their various cells whispered amongst themselves, some more quietly than others.

"...and they called me mad, which I thought was terrific."

"Rhett, you're being too loud."

"Oh, thanks, pal."

"I'm not judging you. I'm saying everyone can hear you and now they're all looking at us again."

Rhett and Jaime looked around at the group, pointedly not meeting Sendira's gaze.

"Oh, look!" Jaime said as he pointed at the water. "The last vessel is here."

Their shoulders slumped with relief as all attention turned to the newly arrived submarine.

"You need to learn to modulate your voice," Jaime whispered.

"You know I've never been good at talking without breathing."

"Have you been doing the exercises I showed you?"

"Yes, I've been doing the exercises."

"Regularly?"

"We've been very busy. You know Sendira always makes me wash the clockwork king. Do you know how hard it is to degrease that thing?"

"You worship the god of Purity. You can't get a good detergent?"

"I had a guy smuggling crystal wash out of the city but he said someone bought up all the excess supply."

They noticed Sendira staring at them again and fell silent.

Another vessel docked and two more people emerged from it. This time only one was a member of the order while the other was hooded, collared and shackled, arms bound behind his back. The order member shoving him up the ramp was a fierce-looking woman with pale skin, red hair and green eyes.

"Thank you, Kelleigh," Melody said as the woman delivered the prisoner to stand in front of the assembled leaders. Kelleigh then joined the rest of Melody's cell.

"Where's your prisoner?" she asked Rhett and Jaime quietly.

"That Asano guy took him," Jaime said.

"What did I tell you when we split up?"

"Shush," Rhett said, pointing to where Sendira was removing the prisoner's hood.

"Who in Purity's name is this?" Heston asked.

"Isn't Purity's name Purity?" Rhett asked, earning him an elbow jab from Kelleigh.

Fortunately for Rhett, the leadership's attention was on the shackled man in front of them.

"Meet Gibson Amouz," Melody said. "Son of Lord Cassin Amouz and heir to the seat of House Amouz."

"This isn't your daughter," Elise asked.

"No," Melody said. "It isn't."

"But the whole point of the operation was to grab your daughter," Caitlyn said.

"This does seem to be an idea you have all latched on to," Melody said. "I'm really not sure where it came from. Sendira, have you been telling people we were going after my daughter?"

"No, Melody. I only ever referred to the target as the target, for operational security purposes. I became aware, during the operation, that the order members with me believed the target to be your daughter. As acquiring the target was outside of their designated tasks, I declined from correcting them."

"I think I'm starting to see why you all have questions regarding my priorities," Melody said. "You believed that I was using the order's resources to bring in my daughter. This would be inappropriate, of course, for while I would certainly like to see my daughter redeemed, the order's purpose cannot be subjugated to any personal agenda. Where you got the idea that I would do so, I cannot imagine."

The expressions of the four cell leaders that had stepped up to question Melody's authority ranged from carefully controlled to poisonous, but they all realised that they had been played. Melody had artfully manipulated them into challenging her in front of all their people on spurious grounds, undermining any further attempts they might make to challenge her going forward.

For her part, Melody continued to twist the knife.

"Young Master Amouz, here," she explained, "is heir to House Amouz, as previously mentioned. House Amouz controls or has an interest in more than half of the mining

operations in the Sea of Storms, including the bulk of high-rank mineral acquisition. The reason we have put such time and care into capturing him – in the course of which we discovered our new clockwork kings – is for the next stage of our plans."

"Building constructs," Marika said.

"Precisely," Melody said. "Pure converted are all well and good but they also come with certain problems. One is the need to obtain essence users as material, and the other is that their capabilities are rather lacking in variety. Building our own constructs will alleviate this, and the materials required for each construct are both cheap and easy to obtain, relatively speaking."

Melody's speech was for the benefit of the rank and file, who were usually given more orders than explanations. The cell leaders knew exactly what needed to be done and why.

"The problem with setting up a construct factory," Melody continued, "is that while the materials for individual constructs are unexceptional, the facility itself requires quite an initial outlay that is rather more extravagant. Young Master Amouz, here, and the family secrets he will soon be sharing, is the solution to our problems in this regard."

Chapter 545

That Kind of Power Can Be Lonely

Jason and Clive were in the waterfall room in Jason's cloud house. The walls were still covered in writing boards and they were looking at a section where Clive had scrawled small, densely packed notes.

"I think enhancing your portal ability might actually be viable," Clive said. "The key is using the cloud constructs from your cloud flask as the medium. Boosting the power would wreck you very quickly, but I believe the cloud flask can handle it. It may not be higher rank than you, but it's a growth item, so the potential is there, and it's extremely robust."

"But?" Jason prompted.

"On the astral magic side, I think we have everything covered. It's your instinctive understanding of astral forces, along with the items you've absorbed, that are making this possible, so leveraging them is the easy part."

Jason looked at the walls covered in months of painstaking work by himself and now Clive.

"That was the easy part?"

"The trick is integrating the enhancements into the cloud flask. This is trickier than just shoving some materials into the flask to get the desired result. We'd need to shove you in there, and I don't think that's the way we want to go."

"We need to leverage the bond between myself and the cloud flask," Jason said.

"Yes. We need to develop some manner of interface that creates a very specific exchange through that bond, and this is where my understanding falls short. I'm not too humble to claim that my understanding of artifice is rather good, given that it's outside my specialty field, but we are way beyond my level of expertise. Not only is a cloud flask breathtakingly complicated by even growth item standards, but you've made modifications. Not just the shoving stuff in it kind, but the way you've connected to it."

"Yeah," Jason said. "There's the spirit domain, plus I turned it into an item set with my sword and amulet."

"I'd like to know more about the item you used to do that. I should learn as much about it as I can."

"Sure," Jason said as a pair of cloud chairs rose up for them to sit in. "It was called a soul-imprinting triune, and it was unranked, like an essence."

"Where did you get something like that?"

“You know my looting power gives me additional rewards from especially dangerous and powerful enemies.”

“Yes. It replaced the power that gave you odd missions, yes?”

“The quest system, yeah. My own private Adventure Society. Anyway, I was in this city, buying time for evacuation before a monster wave started – this was right after I ranked up to silver. I killed a gold rank monster and looted the—”

“You killed a gold-rank monster?”

“More like finished it off after it crossed a dimensional boundary the hard way. In fairness, it killed me first.”

“You didn’t tell us about this when you were talking about what you did over there.”

“I’m sure Farrah told you more than I did,” Jason said.

“She said there were some bad days.”

“This was one of those. It was a big city with a lot of innocent people and not enough time to get them out.”

Jason smiled, forcing himself from dropping into a funk.

“We helped a lot of people those few days,” he said. “Yes, a lot died, but there’s a lot of people who didn’t because of people who stepped up. I spent a lot of time dwellings on the leaders of the organisations I dealt with over there and how generally crappy they were, but most of the rank and file were basically adventurers, doing their best to help people. Fighting hard and making sacrifices. Arabelle says I should focus on that when I’m thinking about those times. It helps, I guess.”

“You don’t have a lot of background on the triune, then, if you looted it from a monster. Let’s go through what you know about its effects.”

Jason and Clive continued to discuss their project until it was time for Jason to make lunch.

“I’m not sure we can move forward without consulting someone who understands cloud flask construction,” Clive said. “Unfortunately, that’s extremely rare. I’ve only ever heard of diamond-rankers making them.”

“Emir is probably our best bet there,” Jason said. “He knows who created both of our flasks.”

“It will probably have to wait until after the surge is over, then,” Clive said. “It’s still hard just getting a water link slot. As for Emir showing up in person, I think there’s still a standing order for his arrest.”

Jason put on a big spread of salads and sandwiches because the cloud house was unusually full. His friends were always busy, even Taika, who had been going out on

delivery runs to low-danger zones with other bronze-rankers. Travis was holed up on some kind of project, frequently with Farrah, which they had thus far refused to tell anyone the details of. Dawn had been out of town since the battle with the Builder cities, as she still had valuable guidance to offer places where the Builder was an imminent threat. She had just arrived back in Rimaros, however, and quietly paid a visit to the cloud house.

Today, everyone happened to be free at the same time, if only for a few hours and it was a full house. Dawn was sitting next to Jason at a long table covered in food as everyone tucked merrily in. She watched, bemused as she enjoyed a social gathering unlike any she had experienced in many centuries.

"You have a talent for making people overlook the difference in rank," she said to Jason. "Even modulating my aura to put people at ease, they are rarely so unreserved around me."

"Sounds lonely," Jason said. "But that was why the World-Phoenix sent you instead of some lackey to ride herd on me, right?"

"Yes," she said. "I was uncertain, at first. Inhabiting a powerless avatar gave me many experiences I had forgotten from the distant past. It took me some time to understand why it was valuable to the World-Phoenix."

"It wasn't just for your wellbeing?" Belinda asked, sitting on the other side of Dawn to Jason. While there was still a level of reverential trepidation to the silver ranker from Clive and Humphrey especially, Belinda shared Jason's preference for judging people by criteria other than rank.

"The World-Phoenix doesn't think in those terms," Dawn explained. "The fact that great astral beings primarily interact with the cosmos through vessels leads people to anthropomorphise them to a degree that isn't strictly accurate. It's not just that they don't think like mortals but that the level they operate on isn't the same as ours. In some regards they might not even be considered sentient, any more than gravity or heat is sentient."

"The Builder is an exception, though, isn't he?" Jason asked.

"Yes," Dawn said. "There are many mysteries surrounding the ascension of the Builder and the sanctioning of his predecessor. Secrets that even I and others like me are not privy to. Those secrets, whatever they may be, are widely considered to be the impetus for the Builder's famously erratic and idiosyncratic behaviour."

"It's not just about the vessels he uses?" Clive asked, joining in on the conversation.

"That is a part of it," Dawn said. "A larger part than most realise. I was explaining the World-Phoenix's purpose in assigning me to watch over Jason. Their vessels, like I used to be, play a much greater role than simply translating the will and intention of the great

astral beings. With the possible exception of the Builder, great astral beings are incapable of thinking on a scale as small as the one we operate on. They see things on a cosmic scale; they think of people in numbers so large we don't have words for them. They cannot look at you or I as individuals any more than you can look at the molecules that make up your body."

"The what?" Clive asked.

"The tiny things that everything is made of," Jason said. "Don't tell Knowledge I told you that. Ask Travis about it."

"What's that?" Travis asked from the other end of the table.

"I was telling Clive how molecules are the tiny things that everything is made of."

"That's not really how that works," Travis said. "I don't think Knowledge would like you spreading that kind of thing around."

"Well, you ask her how much you can tell Clive and leave me out of it," Jason said.

"Dawn, what were you saying about vessels?"

"Vessels aren't just mouthpieces for the great astral beings but the means by which those beings operate on any scale an individual mortal can perceive."

"Are you saying they need vessels to think for them?" Jason asked.

"It's vastly more complicated than that," Dawn said, "but yes, to a large degree. I was the First Sister of the Cult of the World-Phoenix, which essentially made me its leader across a region of the cosmos larger than I can ever expect to see. But I was only one of numbers beyond counting, and between us all, we formed something like a hive mind. A thought engine made up of the most powerful mortals in existence. When you think of the consciousness of a great astral being, this is what you're actually dealing with. It is possible to commune directly with a great astral being, but only for those who have spent years in preparing to become a prime vessel. Doing so is unlike anything I can begin to describe, however. It is to touch the infinite; it cannot be encapsulated."

"I know a guy who'll sell you mushrooms that do something similar," Belinda said.

"Lindy!" Clive scolded as Jason chuckled and Dawn shook her head with a bemused expression.

"My larger point is," Dawn explained, "that the World-Phoenix doesn't care about me or my wellbeing because it can't. What it can recognise is when a tool, in this case, me, is not functioning the way it should. There is a limit to mortal power and I have reached it. As you might imagine, that kind of power affects you in various ways. You will come to understand this more as you realise how gold and diamonds ranks are not like the ones that came before, but that still lies ahead."

"How so?" Humphrey asked, joining in. "My mother said something very similar to me after she got to gold-rank."

"What else did she tell you?" Dawn asked.

"That I'd learn more when I got stronger."

"There you are, then," Dawn told him. "But as Jason said, that kind of power can be lonely. Even enemies are somewhat friends because there are so few who know what you know and have seen what you've seen. It's isolating, taking you away from mortality, both literally and figuratively. I am not much easier to kill than a god."

"It's possible to kill gods?" Humphrey asked.

"No," Dawn said. "It isn't. The point is, it becomes easy to let what you are consume who you are until nothing is left. I may no longer be the direct vessel of the World-Phoenix but I am still connected to it and always will be. My purpose and role in its service is forever and I am proud of that. But that role is of a mortal representative. I now realise how removed I had become from mortal sensibilities, drifting too far from what the World-Phoenix needs me to be. As a tool, I had become a hammer with no head."

"So your boss sent you to me, knowing I'd drag you into the muck," Jason said.

"It's not quite that simple, but more or less," Dawn told him. "And I thank you for doing so."

"Yeah, no worries," Jason said. "Can you pass me that fire-plum sauce?"

Liara had taken the unusual step of allowing a Shade body to occupy her shadow. She wanted to know the moment that he learned any new information. Unfortunately, Shade's bodies that had hitched a ride with the Purity worshippers had been sealed from communication by whatever protections the enemy facilities boasted. Contact was cut off from the moment they entered the underwater vessels the enemies used. Shade could tell no more than that his bodies were still intact and not under any duress.

"Anything?" she asked as she sat in an office in the Adventure Society building. She was not using her own secure office because the shielding around the Builder response unit's facilities would cut Shade off as effectively as the Purity stronghold.

"Nothing new," Shade said.

"Sorry," she told him. "I know you would tell me, yet I'm asking every few minutes."

"Sorry for what?" Shade asked.

"For being annoying."

“You do realise whose familiar I am, don’t you? I am older than some of this world’s gods and my knowledge base now includes a comprehensive understanding of the canonicity of various entries to the Knight Rider franchise.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I am not largely an advocate for ignorance,” Shade said, “but in this instance, I offer with all goodwill my hope that you retain yours in perpetuity.”

There was a knock at the door and Liara called her assistant in. It was an adventure society functionary assigned to her for administrative purposes, rather than one of her subordinate adventurers.

“Lord Cassin Amouz has arrived,” the functionary informed her.

“Thank you. Show him in.”