

## Chapter 578

### The Kind of Pain I'm Used To

Jason Asano's cloud house was currently part house and part dark temple; not a clean division but a disorienting mismatch of pieces. It was as if someone had taken the shattered remnants of two very different buildings and assembled a new one from what they could salvage. This was the result of Jason slowly transforming the building from the state it had been left in after the events that transformed it and Jason both.

Jason had almost killed himself again in a move that was characteristically extravagant, self-destructive and desperate. To rescue his team and a group of civilians trapped in a mine below the sea floor, he had used the cloud house and his own body to channel forces that the house could handle but he could not. Only the frenzied intervention of friends and a number of peculiarities about Jason himself allowed him to survive at all, and the repercussions were heavy. The process had been more than a little overt, and now there were observers stationed near the cloud house, discreetly watching.

The damage to Jason ran soul deep; well beyond the ability of healing magic to repair. Recovery was a combination of time and exercising the mana in his magical body. Just circulating his mana to move around exacted a pain that was more than physical, being akin to a soul attack. If he hadn't long ago endured far worse, he would have had trouble functioning at all.

Jason pushed himself more and more with each passing day, since using magic accelerated his recovery. The more he could take the pain, the faster he would get back to full strength, and one thing Jason could do was take pain. Whether physical or spiritual, it was something with which he had become intimately familiar since magic's arrival into his life.

Always preferring to do a single task for multiple ends, one of Jason's most frequent magical exercises was reshaping his cloud house, turning it from an ominous black temple into a friendly, fluffy house made of clouds. It was still a work in progress, leading to the house's current unusual state.

Jason had been alternate dreading and anticipating a visit from his diamond-rank friend, Dawn. When finally turned up, they discussed the ramifications of what he'd done to himself and what his future held, once he'd recovered. In particular, they discussed one of the side effects of the magical event: Jason coming into possession of a certain object.

Great astral beings were the most powerful entities in the cosmos, and the nature of both themselves and their power was known as authority. After breaking down an item

created by such a being, Jason know had a piece of that power, physically manifested. It was only the barest sliver, but it came from an entity whose core purpose was to make new universes, so even that meagre amount was transcendently potent.

It was not the kind of object that should be in the hands of Dawn, who was at the peak of mortal power, let alone, Jason. She had made it clear that he needed to get rid of it before someone came to do it for him and, to her surprise, he agreed. Caught off guard by Jason making the sensible choice, she hadn't stopped him before he marched outside of the sanctuary of his cloud house.

Jason's cloud house was one of his spirit domains. He didn't have a full grasp of what a spirit domain was, exactly, since Dawn and Shade both refused to tell him, purportedly for his own good. Even so, simply possessing a spirit domain gave him a certain level of inherent understanding. He knew spirit domains were somehow related to power beyond that which mortals normally possessed. It was similar to the inner sanctuaries of temples to the gods, and inside his spirit domain, even gods could not spy on him. It was as if his spirit domain was territory from which they were excluded.

Once he was outside of his spirit domain cloud house, gods and great astral beings would immediately know about the sliver of authority in his possession. Knowing that they would not tolerate him keeping it, he settled in to wait for them to send someone along.

Dawn warned Jason not to speak of anything too delicate outside of his spirit domain. It would shield them from eavesdroppers both divine and otherwise, with many observers still watching the cloud house. Following that warning, Jason quickly mentioned something to Dawn that he didn't want to get yelled at about before stepping out of the spirit domain and onto the lawn in front of his cloud house.

Dawn was still standing in the archway entrance.

"You realise I can just yell at you from here, right?" she asked him.

Jason concentrated, grunting with pain as he used his magic. The spirit domain shrank into the building just enough to leave Dawn standing outside of it.

"You think you're funny, don't you?" she asked.

He grinned, although the lingering pain showed in his eyes.

"Yeah. And so do you."

She shook her head, not denying it as she stepped out to join him on the lawn. They made an odd pair, standing side by side. She had an elegant white dress and hair like delicate strings of rubies, sparkling in the sun. He was emaciated and hunched over like a retiree. He was also dressed like one, in a floral shirt and tan shorts, as if he'd wandered off from his warm-climate retirement community.

The cloud house was on a clifftop, close to a river that spilled over the edge to the lagoon below. There was an invisible magical barrier running along the cliff, keeping children – or their parents who had a few too many to drink – from going over the side.

It was a beautiful spot to spend a warm, tropical day. Wisps of cloud spilled from the flask-amulet around Jason's neck and took the shape of a floating couch, complete with a shade to keep the sun off. It was a minor use of magic, paining him barely enough to elicit a wince.

"I thought I was used to pain," he said, settling on the couch. "I've been impaled, burned with acid spit and had limbs chopped off. Completely off, and I've gotten used to it. This pain is something else, though."

"That's because your soul and your body are no longer separate things," Dawn said, sitting down next to him. "It's just one thing, now, and you went and ruined it. That shouldn't even be possible, but if only one lunatic will find a way, you're the lunatic for the job."

"I'm a trendsetter."

"You're suicidal."

"I am not suicidal. I don't try to get myself killed. It just kind of happens."

"You couldn't have avoided any of those deaths, then?" Dawn asked lightly.

"Oh, that's not fair. I definitely couldn't have avoided the first one. My crappy apartment got sucked through a dimensional rift. And the second and third deaths were heroic sacrifices, thank you very much. Do you know what happens when you don't turn up for the heroic sacrifice? The bad guys are all 'where'd he go?' 'I think he bunked off.' 'Great, lets blow up that city full of people.' And then a city gets blown up or some gold-rank monster arrives in it before the civilians have time to evacuate."

"What about when Shako killed you?"

"The Builder's henchman-in-chief? That guy sucks. He's diamond-rank. Killing me was just petty."

"You did mouth off at him."

Jason slapped his forehead in exaggerated realisation.

"Of course! I was rude to him. That totally justified murdering me."

"What did you expect him to do?"

"His job. The Builder didn't send him there to kill me."

Dawn suddenly stood up, moving out from under the shade to look up. Jason made the shade vanish with a wave of his hand to follow her gaze. He spotted a man with pale skin, a shock of red hair and brown robes, descending from the sky.

“He didn’t send me to kill you this time either Asano” Shako said. “But let’s see where the day takes us.”

“Oh, you have got to be kidding,” Jason complained. “I thought you took care of the ginger Jedi.”

“So did I,” Dawn said.

“Didn’t you say some scary lady took him away?”

“Carmen of the Sundered Throne,” Dawn said.

“Which is who of what exactly?”

“That is the concern of those who walk the upper echelons of the cosmos, Asano,” Shako said as he landed lightly on the ground in front of them. “It is not something you need to know.”

“That excuse went out the window the moment the bosses of you two started playing ‘blow up the planet,’ with me as the meeple.”

“Pawns do not get to question kings, Asano.”

Jason pushed himself out of the chair with a groan, like an old man.

“I’m so tired of this,” he said. “Once upon a time, I’d have said something pithy about pawns reaching the other side of the board and getting promoted. You’d look down on me, and then, somewhere down the line, you and I would get into some conflict. Again. And I’d get my arse kicked. Again. But I’d get what I want and you wouldn’t. Again. But I’m past tired of that game and I don’t even care how you crawled out of whatever hole they threw you in.”

“I do,” Dawn said. “You shouldn’t be here, Shako. No one should be seeing you for a very long time, even by our standards.”

“I’m only on a furlough,” Shako explained. “The Builder made a proposal and the Sundered Throne accepted. Preparations for the Prime Vessel that will succeed me have not been completed, so I was required in order to channel the Builder without killing the vessel. Which is something you apparently care about, Asano.”

“What proposal does the Builder have?” Dawn asked.

“You know how things are with great astral beings,” Shako said. “Everything is striking bargains and making pacts.”

“It’s because of the authority,” Dawn realised, talking to herself rather than Shako. “The Sundered Throne doesn’t want it in the hands of a mortal.”

“Yes,” Shako said. “Hand it over, Asano. Or are you refusing?”

Dawn’s head jerked to warn Jason but he held up a hand to forestall her.

"I know better than to answer that," Jason assured her. He then hobbled right into Shako's personal space, craning his neck to look at the taller man.

"You don't have any authority, do you Shako? Maybe you lug around a little for your boss, or used to, at least. But you've never had any of your own, have you?"

"Of course not. It is not my place."

"Well, I do have some," Jason said, plucking a brown marble tablet out of his inventory, grunting as the magic circulating in his body to do so pained him.

Shako moved faster than Jason could think, his hand shooting out for the tablet. Dawn moved to intervene but Shako was closer. The moment Shako's hand touched the tablet he was thrown away so fast it created a sonic boom. Jason was also tossed back, not by the same power as Shako but simply the backwash of the diamond-ranker's forced departure. He was hammered into the all of his cloud house.

Shako was blasted through the clifftop safety barrier as if it wasn't there, the air shimmering along the cliff in a wave as the magic collapsed. It was designed to stop children and drunk people from falling off, not a diamond-ranker thrown by an even greater power.

Wind kicked like a squall from the raw speed of Shako being thrown away, making waves of the surface of the river and rattling windows of the nearby houses. Dawn rushed to check on Jason who had been pushed into the soft white wall of his cloud house like a strawberry into a cream cake.

"I'm fine," he told her as he pushed himself out of the cloud wall. He turned to look at the Jason-shaped hole it as it slowly filled back in. "I feel like a cartoon character."

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yeah," he said, his voice strained and gravely. "This is the kind of pain I'm used to."

"What was that?" Dawn asked, turning to look where Shako had shot off.

"Authority," Jason said, looking over at the tablet in the grass where he dropped it.

"Have you ever tried to steal authority?"

"Of course not," Dawn said.

"Well, now you know what happens if you do."

"Did you know what would happen when you took it out?"

"I could feel it," Jason said. "From the moment I accepted that it belonged to me. Shako could no more take it from me than he could burn down the cosmos." Jason held out his hand and the tablet flew into it, like an obedient child coming home.

Shako reappeared, flying through the air to land in front of them.

“You should have known better,” Jason told him. “That isn’t the kind of power you can just take.”

“That power doesn’t belong to you.”

“You’re getting punted halfway across the ocean says differently. Now, they sent you specifically for a reason. Get your boss on the line.”

“He can’t,” Dawn said. “Sending Shako here was pointless. There’s a pact in place, meaning the Builder isn’t allowed to use vessels here.”

“He’s used them before, deal or no deal,” Jason said.

“The Builder has only spoken through vessels,” Shako said in defence of his master. “The ones you saw were not used for anything.”

“Speaking *is* a thing,” Jason said. “But your boss pushing boundaries of the deals he makes isn’t the point. The point is that I’m giving him permission.”

“That’s not your permission to give,” Dawn said.

“It is today,” Jason said. “And get your boss here too, while we’re at it. I like you, Dawn, but it’s time I spoke with your manager.”

“You don’t get to dictate to great astral beings,” Shako admonished, his tone that of an exasperated adult talking to a child.

“No?” Jason snarled, holding up the tablet. “Then lets see how much damage I can do with this before one of you kills me.”

“You don’t have the—”

“Shut up Shako!” Dawn yelled. “Are you seriously going to test the resolve of a man who sacrificed his only resurrection rather than let you walk over him?”

Shako grimaced but remained silent.

“That’s what I thought,” Jason said. “Get your bosses here.”

“Jason, I wasn’t just saying it when I said that isn’t your permission to give. There is a pact in place that governs those rules.”

“And pacts are about trading authority, right?” Jason asked and tossed the tablet back onto the ground. “I just so happen to have some, burning a hole in my pocket.”