

## Chapter 573

### Faith is Soul-Deep

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

“Good to see you,” Jason told him.

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

“How is the Amouz kid?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Humphrey?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It was that bad?"

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

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

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

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

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

Jason winced.

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

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

“Sure. Did it actually help?”

“It did. And I’d like to—”

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

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

\*\*\*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Things are not that simple, Jason.”

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

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

“I don’t like the idea of those brothers working together to find better ways to kill me.”

“It’s not about you, Jason.”

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

“I already have.”

“I’m guessing that the messengers aren’t big on volunteering for ‘better ways to kill them’ experiments.”

“They are not.”

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

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

“They’re that strong?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you mean?" he asked.

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

"How is he?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

"And what's that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So it would seem."

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

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