

## Chapter 587

### A Gentleman Doesn't Tell

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

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

"Are you and she...?"

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

Jason had coarse gravel in his voice.

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

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

"I doubt it."

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

"Jason, you're a unique case."

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

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

"Can anyone else do better?"

"Possibly."

"A lot better?"

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

Carlos nodded.

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

“Did you get your revenge?”

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

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

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

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

“You’re saying I should let it go.”

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

“Yes,” Carlos admitted.

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

Jason sighed.

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

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

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

\*\*\*

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

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

“You’ve seen it before?”

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

Jason chuckled.

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

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

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

“Then just tell me.”

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

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

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

“You threw me across the room.”

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

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

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

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

“My aura power can’t do that.”

“I know,” Carlos agreed.

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

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

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

“Should I try it out?”

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

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

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

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

“Gods normally come to you?”

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

Carlos ran his hands over his face.

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

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

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

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

“And you could do it?”

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

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

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

“That wasn’t a challenge, Jason.”

Jason’s shoulders slumped.

“Fine.”

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

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

\*\*\*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where's Dawn today?"

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

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

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

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

"So they just decided I can know whatever?"

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

“Magic space princess?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You still have her locked up?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh. Sorry about that.”

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

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