

Chapter 568

The Awakening of Mr Asano

Under the sense-suppressing hood, Melody shouldn't have been able to sense anything. Even the oppressive aura pervading the strange cloud building had been cut off once the hood was yanked back over her head. So when that aura punched through the hood, stronger than ever, it was a startling experience, being the only thing she could sense.

At the risk of being punched in the head by her daughter again, she reached up and pulled off the hood. She immediately noticed the massive light show overhead and Asano's aura, even more pervasive now that the hood was gone. All attention was elsewhere and Melody took a gamble attempting to slink away. There were only a couple of the shadow familiars left and even Sophie was too distracted by the giant eye washing the platform in blue and orange light. With the aura washing out any other magical sense, no one noticed as Melody slipped through the doorway and went looking for a way out.

Melody's speed was limited by the shackles on her wrists and ankles but she adapted fairly well, managing a surprisingly swift shuffle. She made her way down the stairs quickly ducking through an open doorway as she heard three people come rushing up the stairs. Pressed against the wall, she heard them go right past her on the other side. Fortunately, there was no risk of them sensing her aura with Asano's continuing to ramp up.

While she was certainly curious as to what was going on she wouldn't give up a precious chance of freedom over it. Fortunately, the aura was not hostile, feeling more like a benevolent, yet utterly unyielding dictator.

Melody made her way down the stairs, spotting a large open archway that led outside, but something rose from the floor, not through it but being made from the cloud-stuff the floor was comprised of. It was made of the same dark cloud-stuff as the floor from which it emerged, but then the cloud stuff became more substantive. It took the form of a person who was not tall in the first place and made all the shorter by the absence of a head. The cloud material became solid, blank and featureless; a black, headless mannequin.

A nebulous blue and orange eye blinked into existence large enough to occupy the space where the mannequin's head should have been. Then red robes, the colour of dried blood were conjured over it, as was a hooded cloak, void-black and dotted with stars.

It looked like Asano if one of his eyes had grown to replace his entire head, the eye watching from the hood like an alien face. Melody stood still as she and the strange entity

watched one another. She took a cautious step forward, then another as the entity didn't react. Then she tried dashing past and it blurred into motion. Its cloak floated around it, obscuring it just as Asano's had when she fought him. Its movements, or what she could see of them, seemed identical to Asano's.

It intercepted her as it conjured a black and red dagger into its hand. She tried to dodge but the dagger went beyond normal reach using an arm made of shadows and slashed her arm. She was better than Asano and this strange replica of him, but not while she was shackled and collared. Her movement was impeded and her powers suppressed, while the simulacrum could use at least some of Asano's abilities.

The entity smoothly flowed into her path, blocking her escape. It swung the dagger again and she fell back. The entity didn't follow, remaining between her and the archway leading out.

Melody looked at the cut on her arm and saw immediate evidence of brutal afflictions, feeling them in her body at the same time. The flesh around the wound was already darkening and veins were becoming visible as they turned black under her skin.

Blood was a part of every essence user's body, regardless of rank, not disappearing with rank the way the heart, lungs and even the brain did. The blood flow of a silver-ranker was not like that of a normal person, however. Their circulatory systems were closer to what Jason would recognise as a chart of meridians and acupoints. Even the blood itself was not the same, being a channel for mana rather than oxygen and the other elements critical to a human body.

Melody felt the taint coursing through her blood, left behind by the entity's conjured dagger. It was unpleasant, but not anything she couldn't deal with if she just got away. She hadn't been subjected to the dangerous spell Asano used to endlessly escalate his afflictions.

"Your fate is to suffer."

The entity didn't sound like a living thing, its voice tombstone cold. Melody knew Asano's powers and she knew that incantation, having been given thorough information on Asano and his insidious abilities. She wasn't sure how he was replicating himself while dying upstairs, but now she had to get away and find a way to cleanse herself before the afflictions now growing inside her became too advanced to deal with.

She knew she wouldn't be able to get past the entity while she was manacled, but it only seemed to be blocking her way out. She went back up the stairs in search of another egress but found a second, identical entity rising from the floor. She looked back, confirming there were two of them.

The new one raised an arm, pointing not the way she had come but through a door. Outnumbered, collared and chained, Melody played along. Now that the afflictions eating into her flesh were escalating, she needed someone to remove them and fast. It was now clear that she would only find that as a prisoner. The entity led her into a room; an empty black cube, devoid of any features other than the doorway she had walked through.

“If you don’t find someone to get these afflictions off of me,” she said, turning to face the entity, “you might as well kill me and save the suffering.”

The entity raised a hand and melody’s eyes went wide, wondering if it was going to take her up on killing her.

“Feed us your sins.”

Having her life force radiate out from her body was a surprisingly warm and pleasant sensation, surrounding her with a red glow. She both saw and felt the taint in her life force, and also how it was drained away, vanishing into the entity’s hand. Her life force receded into her body but the entity didn’t lower its hand. Leeches shot out of it, spattering across her body. She moved to start swatting them away but then paused, looking back to the entity that was now lowering its hand.

The leeches did not appear to be replicas created from cloud stuff but the genuine article; Asano’s actual familiar. Despite their tiny rings of savage lamprey teeth, the leeches were not drinking her blood. She realised they were a warning not to go wandering again.

The doorway behind the entity closed. There was no light in the room, only the blue-orange glow of the nebula eye, inside the hood. Everything went black as the eye blinked out of existence.

In the dark, Melody was not afraid but contemplative. The information she had was that Asano’s cleansing power was more deadly to enemies than the afflictions it removed, yet she felt nothing but refreshed. While the wound on her arm remained, the afflictions delivered through it did not, and nothing had been left in their place. The fact that her peak-silver recovery attribute was healing the wound fast enough that she could feel it was evidence enough.

Carlos looked at the giant image of daylight inside a cloak, inside a dark field that towered over the island below it. Taller than any building he had ever seen, they had spotted it well before the island came into view.

“That’s him, alright,” Carlos said.

In Greenstone, several years ago, Carlos had once tested Jason, projecting his aura with a ritual to check that there was not a star seed of the Builder hidden in his soul. Underestimating the power Jason's soul could output, relative to his lowly iron rank, Carlos had made the ritual too powerful. The result was a similar, but much smaller image being projected over the city of Greenstone, along with Jason's aura.

In the hours following the appearance of the massive projection, the aura it extended slowly diminished. Night came and the daylight portion of the projection lit up the sky of Arnote until the projection itself finally started growing smaller as the dawn approached. As for the woman named Dawn, she did not approach, watching, unnoticed, from high in the air. Her vessel, a cottage inside a translucent bubble, was invisible to the eyes and magical senses of all but the local diamond-rankers.

She stood in the cottage garden, right where it met the globe, looking below. After having used her single intervention to eliminate one of the Builder's cities, she had to be careful about anything that could be seen as her intervening again. She could not afford to be further restricted before the next time she needed to act, which was still years away.

If she'd been forced to step in to keep Jason alive, it would have been a significant problem. The Builder could have leveraged the infraction and it would have made things much more difficult later. The World-Phoenix's interest in Jason ended once the integrity of the two worlds was assured, which meant that forces currently held at bay by that attention would no longer hold back from acting. The next time Dawn could step in to help Jason, it would be wholly of her own volition, without the World-Phoenix's support. If she had already been punished for overstepping, that would be more difficult, if even possible at all.

Dawn's senses were not blocked even by the monumental aura spilling out of the cloud temple like some spiritual cataclysm. She kept careful watch over Jason's condition and felt relief wash through her as she felt him pass out of danger. He was hideously damaged, both physically and spiritually, and would take a long time to recover, but he would survive. And inside the cloud construct, he was about as safe as he could be short of Dawn hiding him herself.

With the commotion kicked up by the display coming from Jason's cloud temple, The Adventure Society and Magic Society were forced to step in, along with the civic authorities. While not being harmful to anyone, the aura coming from the temple caused panic across the island, especially in conjunction with the humungous physical projection

that went with it. Coming not so long after the Builder city attack on Rimaros, many thought another such attack was in progress.

While the authorities were moving to handle the chaos, various others had more specific goals. Carlos, Arabelle, Farrah and Rufus arrived and immediately entered the temple, none of them being rejected. Greetings were brief, the team knowing Carlos from the months he spent helping Jason years before.

The platform at the top of the cloud temple was large, which was useful with the increasing number of people present. Along with the unconscious Jason was his team, Rufus and his team, Taika, Travis, Arabelle and Carlos. Shade's presence was a pair of bodies, glowing blue-white with overcharged mana. He was not the only familiar, with Stash having, at some point, shifted from Belinda's form to Jason's as he fretted. The copy Jason looked down at the real one, identical aside from looking much healthier and having a bushy moustache.

Under the domineering sky projection, Carlos confirmed that Jason would survive, although he warned the others that the recovery time would be extensive. He would likely not even wake up for days, possibly weeks. On hearing that, Humphrey looked up at the projection, then at the team.

"You know what Jason would have us doing in this situation," he said.

"Making sandwiches," Neil said. After working with Clive and Shade to keep Jason alive, all three were looking worse for wear. Neil looked exhausted, Clive was pale and his dark brown hair had turned such a glossy black it looked almost like it had a blue sheen. Shade was even more off-colour than Clive's hair, his usual black mostly silver-blue.

"No," Humphrey said. "He would not... okay, he probably *would* want us making sandwiches, but more importantly, he isn't the only member of the team in danger. Before things went so wrong we had a plan, and that plan is still in motion. Belinda is going to reveal the location of the enemy stronghold and we have to be ready to move when she does."

"We're in too," Rufus said, Gary and Farrah nodding their agreement.

Humphrey looked at Carlos and Arabelle, talking quietly where they were crouched over Jason.

"We need to leave him to the experts," he said. "Princess Liara was assembling the strike team for the stronghold, so we need to go find her and join it."

"I am afraid that I will be of limited assistance," Shade said. "The two bodies I have here are infused with overcharged mana. They will break down in a relatively short time and are of little use unless you need something to explode."

“Oh, I imagine we can find a use for that,” Farrah said.

“My four remaining intact bodies are with Belinda, Princess Liara, Korinne Pescos in the mining facility, and the Adventure Society official currently managing the mining facility evacuation,” Shade said. “The princess is already on her way back to Livaros with her husband. I will inform her of your intentions and your imminent arrival, if that is satisfactory.”

“It is,” Humphrey said. “Clive, we’re going to need a ride.”

Magic seeped through the front of Clive’s clothes, coalescing into the form of his rune tortoise familiar, Onslow. Onslow floated in the air and started growing, the shell opening into top and bottom halves. Inside was a little humanoid tortoise, looking out curiously with big eyes.

“Wait, where’s the zealot?” Sophie asked, remembering Melody.

“The cloud house has detained her,” Shade said. “Colin is currently guarding her.”

“What do you mean, the cloud house detained her?” Clive asked.

“I am not entirely clear on that,” Shade said. “I suspect answers will wait on the awakening of Mr Asano.”

“But he probably got some absurd new ability from all this, didn't he?” Neil asked.

“It would appear so,” Shade said.

“See?” Gary asked Taika. “What did I say?”