

Chapter 574

Lest He Become a Monster Himself

“You’re saying the god of Purity is pulling a Wizard of Oz?” Jason asked. He was reclined in a cloud chair while Carlos sat facing him on a cloud stool.

“I don’t know what that means,” Carlos said.

“It means there’s no actual god and it’s just some bloke in a booth.”

“No, Jason; it’s not some person in a booth.”

“It would be tricky running an entire branch of a religion on hand puppets and doing a funny voice,” Jason acknowledged. “Who’s behind the curtain then? It wasn’t the Builder the whole time, was it? That would be convoluted and counter-productive in the extreme.”

“That isn’t possible,” Carlos said.

“So? I do impossible stuff all the time. Are you saying a great astral being is worse than me? Actually, the Builder is, now that I think about it. That guy sucks.”

“Jason, you should take this seriously.”

Jason burst out laughing, which quickly turned into a pain-stricken groan.

“Nope,” he croaked.

Carlos frowned but continued.

“It has to be one of the deception gods,” he explained. “There are several of them, but the most likely candidates are Deceit and Disguise.”

“There’s a god just for disguises? That must be a pretty minor god.”

“Disguise is a minor god, but with a more comprehensive field of influence than it may seem at first. Disguise is the god pertaining to masking one thing as another. From disguises to poisoned drinks to counterfeit spirit coins, Disguise the lord of illusion, manipulating assumptions and walking unnoticed in plain sight.”

“And you think the god Disguise has disguised himself as Purity?”

“I don’t think anyone else could, except perhaps one of the other deception gods.”

“And the other gods didn’t notice this going on?”

“I told you about the interconnectedness of the gods. That Healer is brother to War.”

“That’s a metaphor, right? They don’t actually have a mum or anything, right?”

“That is correct. The gods, even those antagonistic to one another, are all part of a complex interplay. They have rules, governing not just themselves and their areas of influence but how they relate to one another. If the god of disguises chooses to take on a disguise, even Knowledge or Truth cannot reveal it.”

“But they’re Knowledge and Truth. Isn’t that their whole thing?”

“It’s complicated, as I described. Gods must be able to act within their sphere of influence without others simply negating it or it becomes a dangerous clash between the forces that govern reality. This is why the gods are bound by convoluted limitations.”

“Okay, but doesn’t that suggest that half the gods could be a scam? What if most of them don’t even exist and it’s just a small handful of them playing silly buggers? The whole pantheon could be one guy with the world’s most overelaborate puppet show.”

“There are rules that govern these things. Profoundly complicated ones. Every faith has its priests study the nuances of how the gods relate to one another. It’s extremely complicated and nuanced. Deities have limitations that don’t make sense to mortal sensibilities. What gods can do is impossible to the likes of us, but most people don’t realise that the reverse is also true. The gods are the forces that govern our reality. We have freedoms in our relative weakness that are as unattainable to them as stopping the sun from rising is impossible to us. Understanding those limitations is a field of study that people sink lifetimes into.”

“And you’ve undertaken that kind of study?”

“I’ve dabbled. Every priest has at least some grounding in it. The point is that the relationships between the gods and the ways in which they balance each other out can be difficult to decipher.”

“Is this you taking a long time to say that you have no idea what’s happening?”

“No,” Carlos said. “I think that I do know what’s happening. I just need you to understand that gods don’t relate to one another in the same ways that mortals do.”

“Sure. I’ve dealt with Knowledge a bit, and seen that she has rules about what she can and can’t tell people, even though she knows everything.”

“That’s a very pertinent example, but I’ll come back to that. The Ecumenical Council was convened by the churches to judge the behaviour of the Church of Purity once their collusion with the Cult of the Builder came to light. From there, it became increasingly clear that the church had been operating well outside their own dictates, and had been for some time.”

“You’re only talking about churches, not gods,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Carlos said. “Because of the nature of divine interaction, it is always simpler to act using mortals as proxies. This is one of the key roles of every church. But I think there is more to it than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Ecumenical Council discovered that the Purity church’s improprieties had been escalating over decades. Perhaps even centuries.”

Jason thought about the intervention in his own world, centuries in the past.

"That makes sense," he said.

"I have come to believe that one of the reasons that the churches were acting instead of the gods is that the gods had already dealt with Purity quite some time ago. You're familiar with the concept of sanctioning?"

"I know it's something transcendent beings do instead of killing. Beyond that, I have no idea."

"No one does, but that understanding is enough for this explanation. I think that the gods may have already sanctioned Purity long before you or I were even born. But some rule, like what you described about the limits on what Knowledge could share, prevented the gods from telling their clergy what happened."

"Wouldn't the Purity people notice their god was missing? Also, Purity is still around. Lots of people have seen him in person when he manifests in temple districts across the whole planet. You think it was that deception god the whole time? Disguise, right?"

"Or perhaps Deceit. Either way, for the other gods to inform their clergy or the population at large would encroach on the domain of the deception god. Therefore, they would have been unable to do so."

"And they what? Need someone like you to figure it out, because you're a mortal? You aren't bound to the same strictures and can shout it from the rooftops?"

"Exactly," Carlos said. "I'm convinced that I'm right, but I'm afraid of the ramifications. Just the Purity church being brought low was a massive upheaval. If the people realise that the gods knew that Purity was not even Purity for their entire lives, I don't know what will happen."

"And people aren't likely to respond well to an explanation that it's very complicated and nuanced. They'll start making snap judgements based on bad assumptions and whatever unscrupulous lies people tell that sound like simple answers."

"The dark gods will do very well from this, yes," Carlos said. "I do not like the idea of my actions serving the god of Discord."

"But you're a healer," Jason told him. "You know that sometimes you have to cut the bad parts away before the good parts can recover."

"Yes."

"What does the Disguise god get out of this?"

"Many gods are antagonistic to one another and fall largely into two camps. One camp is made up of gods whose temples and churches you find anywhere in the world there are people. The others are the gods whose priests dwell in the hidden places. Gods

who you pray to not because of something you want, but something you want to avoid.

Pain, Discord, Deceit.”

“And these are the ones who make out great over this.”

“Yes. Discord, in particular.”

“So, it’s all bad news.”

“Not entirely,” Carlos said. “Now that I know what has been happening, I also see what the other gods have been doing. Knowledge knows more than any of the other gods, and while she cannot share her knowledge, she has been raising forces in secret across the world, without even telling them what they are doing or why. This came to light only after people started investigating the Purity church and found Knowledge kept having her forces in the same locations. It was one of the things that helped me put the pieces together.”

“Using a loophole to drop clues,” Jason said. “All these god rules make them seem like lawyers. American lawyers.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“So, what about the actual god of Purity?” Jason asked. “I heard that if a god got sanctioned, a new one would come into being to fill the void.”

“That is my understanding as well,” Carlos said, “but now we are into the realm where historical record gives way to myth and legend. Even assuming that a new god will appear, we have no idea how long that process takes. It could be a thousand years. Ten thousand years.”

“That’s encouraging,” Jason said. “Good luck dealing with all that. I’m glad it’s none of my affair.”

“Not your affair?” Carlos asked. “The entire point of explaining all this is to show you how important it is that we do everything possible to deal with whatever this deception god has planned.”

“You means poking me with a stick while I heal up so you can find better ways to kill me.”

“To deal with the messengers, Jason.”

“They aren’t my responsibility.”

“How can you listen to everything I just said and choose to not act when there is something you can contribute?”

“Oh, I’ll contribute. As an adventurer. I’ll be happy to take any sensible contract to handle threats appropriate for silver-rankers to confront. But that’s it. I’m not going to let you help people design methods to more effectively murder me.”

“You’re a part of this, Jason. The church has come for you already.”

“Yes, I’ve been involved peripherally with the Purity church’s affairs, but I’m still on the outside of this fight. Purity – or whoever it is – may have accepted a contract hit on me, but it’s clear at this point that his peons were more interested in using me as a distraction. They don’t care about me; they’re running out the clock until the Builder leaves, paying lip service to coming after me without ever seeing it through.”

“Jason, you have what is probably the leader of the Order of Redeeming Light somewhere in this building.”

“I have my friend’s mum somewhere in this building.”

“You are in this Jason. And if you’re not, you should be. The fact that you have anything to contribute means that you have the responsibility to do so.”

Anger clouded Jason’s expression.

“Don’t talk to me about responsibility, Carlos. I’m not responsible for dealing with your gods. I’m a silver-ranker and I’ve done my part standing up to worse than gods. I’ve saved a planet. Twice. And it’ll be once more before it stops trying to crack like an egg and disintegrate into the astral.”

Jason’s voice grew stronger, anger pushing him through the pain.

“I’ve fought the Builder with a knife to stop a bunch of giant terraforming robots from wiping out a city full of people and kicking off an interdimensional invasion three years early. I’ve saved tens of thousands of lives directly, and billions, if you count the world I keep saving. My soul has looked into the infinite and been pitted against an entity of such magnitude that the mortal mind lacks the capacity to comprehend its nature, let alone, scope.”

Jason gritted his teeth, choking off a grunt of pain as he pushed himself to sit up straight to look directly at Carlos.

“I understand ramifications of what’s at play here. I understand stakes and challenges. At this stage, a rogue counterfeit god tops out at ‘not great’ on my personal threat scale and I’ll say this again: I’m a silver-ranker. Yes, I’ve been dragged into situations where I was the only one there to stand up and do the job, and I’ve bugged it up a lot. But I did it because I was the only guy who could or would. But this time, there are people who can and will. People who aren’t just some silver-ranker, and I am just some guy this time, Carlos. I’m not *the* guy, which is a refreshing change. I loved the idea of being the hero right up until I was.”

“Not being at the centre of events doesn’t abrogate your responsibility to do what you can, Jason. As hard as it is, you don’t get to shirk that responsibility.”

Jason sucked in a sharp, furious hiss of breath.

“Shirk my responsibility? I fought the Builder, Carlos. I fought him, I won, and I died doing it. And I’ve fought this order of Purity or whoever’s really behind the curtain, and I’m lying here having almost died for my trouble. You told me yourself that it should have killed me. I’m going to repeat myself one more time, Carlos, because it doesn’t seem to be sinking in: I’m a silver-ranker. Can you look me in the eye and tell me that it’s my responsibility to fight armies of angels and a global network of fanatic terrorists?”

“Yes,” Carlos said. “Because you can. If you have the power to do something that can help, you have a moral obligation to do it.”

Carlos stood as the stool he was sitting on suddenly sank into the floor. Jason’s cloud chair did the same, tipping him into a standing position.

“Jason, don’t—”

“Shut up,” Jason snarled, as he staggered, struggling to stay on his feet. He managed to stop stumbling and stand unsteadily in place, his alien eyes burning as they stared at Carlos. Jason ignored his nakedness, his body a pasty and emaciated wreckage. The scars covering his torso stood starkly prominent against his unnaturally pale skin.

“Jason you need to—”

“You think I haven’t done enough?” Jason asked, his voice tomb-quiet. “You’re accusing me of shirking my responsibilities? Ask your friend Arabelle what I’ve done. Ask Farrah. Ask your damn god; I bet he knows all about it.”

Jason’s voice was building as he talked through teeth gritted against the pain. His body was too weak to stand and he was circulating mana to stay upright, wracking his body with torment he fought through using distilled rage.

“Jason, you have a chance to contribute—”

“You think I haven’t paid enough? Do you remember how we met, Carlos? Why you’re in this room? Can you not see what’s in front of your eyes?”

Blue and orange light started gathering in the air behind Jason as blood started leaking from his eyes, still locked onto the healer. Carlos felt Jason’s aura rising but it wasn’t coming from Jason himself. It came from everywhere, like a rising tide, and Jason’s voice rose with it. His aura battered against Carlos, who struggled to fend it off even with his gold rank aura.

“Jason, you’re hurting yourself.”

“I always am. I owe you a lot for helping me when I needed it the most. But that also means you’ve seen just part of the price I’ve paid for living up to my responsibilities. Look at me, Carlos. Look at the person you’re asking to give more than he already has. Look at

what it's done to me and look at what's left. You want to use me again because of what I had to become in order to live up to that responsibility you keep talking about."

"Jason, you need to lie down."

"LOOK AT WHAT I AM!"

Jason's words were carried on a wave of aura with actual physical force. It struck Carlos like a bat hitting a ball, bouncing him off a wall of black cloud-stuff suddenly hard as stone. While the impact was nothing to a gold-ranker, he was profoundly astonished and fell sprawled to the floor. Looking up in shock, he saw that Jason had collapsed to the floor.

In the air above Jason's fallen form, the blue and orange light that had been gathering behind him had coalesced an eye the size of a wagon. Carlos had seen it come into being just as the aura had thrown him across the room and he still felt its gaze on him. The room's aura closed on Carlos, squeezing him like a fist, but only for a moment before the eye started to dissipate. It swiftly dispersed into nothing and the force it exuded vanished with it, releasing its grip on Carlos.

Carlos pushed himself to his feet, hurrying to examine Jason. He was unconscious and bleeding from his eyes and all of his scars as if they were fresh wounds. The room's savage aura dimmed enough that Carlos felt other presences in the room. He stood and turned to face them.

The sinister shadow figure was the most ordinary of Jason's three familiars, all of whom were now lined up in front of him. The blood clone looked like Jason but, to Carlos' aura senses, it felt less like a living thing than an unfathomable chasm of depthless hunger.

As for the last familiar, it was an empty cloak draped over a smaller version of the same eye that had just vanished from the room. Carlos sensed something utterly alien, even compared to the ravening leech monster disguised as Jason. It felt to Carlos as if physical reality itself was an affront to the entity; as if it might annihilate the world for having the temerity to exist.

It lacked anything close to the power to accomplish such a thing, just as the leech monster could not devour every living thing on the planet, despite feeling like that was its very purpose. The three familiars were all imposing on him with their auras, only silver rank but somehow combined and magnified by the cloud temple around him.

People had been calling Jason's abode a cloud temple since its very public transformation, but that was because of its appearance. Carlos had paid it minimal mind, even after experiencing the aura inside. Now, however, he felt it. He wasn't in a place; he

was in a territory. It belonged to someone on a level deeper than he could fathom and he had made that person it belonged to angry.

“It is time for you to go, Priest Quilido,” Shade, told him.

“I need to help him,” Carlos said, pointing at Jason on the floor.

“You’ve helped enough,” Shade said. “You took a man who has already paid the price for giving more than he had and you told him to give even more. Mr Asano has been working with Madam Arabelle to recover from living up to the responsibilities he took on when no one else would. It is unbecoming of a clergyman of the Healer to undo Madam Arabelle’s work, Priest Quilido.”

Shade raised an arm in Jason’s direction and a cloud bed rose from the floor, picking up Jason. Colin moved to adjust him so he was lying comfortably.

“I was wondering if I could do that,” Shade said. “I hesitated to experiment, with Mr Asano so weak and the building connected to him.”

He turned back to Carlos.

“You need to leave before I start testing just how much control I can exert over this building. Go, and direct Madam Arabelle here at her earliest opportunity.”

Carlos looked at the three familiars. He could feel the hostility pouring from all of them, somehow combined and magnified by the building. With a final glance at Jason, he walked to the door leading out of the room.

“Priest Quilido,” Shade called after him. “Do be thorough in explaining to Madam Arabelle what you have done here.”