

Chapter 572

I've Told You Everything

"I'm about to ask you to do something," Dawn said. "Before I do, I'm going to need some of you to leave. Clive, Taika and Travis. Rufus, Farrah and Gary. You can't be here for this and I need you to not ask why."

Clive looked at Dawn for only a moment before nodding, grabbing Travis by the sleeve and leading him from the room. Farrah and Dawn shared a look, Farrah reluctant but finally nodding as well, following the others from the terrace.

"What do you think that's about?" Travis asked, slowing down as the door to the balcony terrace closed behind them.

"If Dawn says we aren't meant to know, then we aren't meant to know," Clive said. "We aren't going to talk about it and you should do your best to distract yourself so you aren't wondering about it."

"Done," Gary said. "We should start getting lunch ready."

"We still have some of that argy fruit jam Jason made," Taika said. "I can go get some scones from the bakery. Most of the people hanging about have gotten bored and left, so it shouldn't be too crowded."

"Let me get the scones while you whip the cream," Gary said. "I always end up with cream in my fur."

"Bro, what did I tell you about licking the bowl? Use a scraper, not your face."

"What's wrong with my face?" Gary asked. "People love my face."

"It's pretty big though. Huge face, small bowl. It's not tricky to see where you're going wrong."

Gary and Taika noticed Travis looking at them, wide-eyed.

"What?" Gary asked.

"Bro, it's obvious," Taika told him.

"Oh, right," Gary said, realising his mistake. "Don't worry; it won't just be sweet scones. I'll get savoury scones, too."

"How are we talking about scones right now?" Travis asked, incredulous.

"Oh," Farrah said, having her own realisation. "You're American. You're getting biscuits and scones mixed up again."

"You think *that's* the problem?" Travis asked, then pointed at the closed door to the terrace, the black cloud-stuff completely sealing off any sound. "Whatever they're talking about in there is really important. Like, fate of the world stuff."

“Bro, if you’re waiting for things to calm down before eating good food, you’re in the wrong social circle.”

“I’m going into the village with Gary,” Rufus said. “I want some of that butter Mrs Marsh makes for the savoury scones.”

Farrah put a reassuring hand on Travis’ shoulder.

“Remember where we met, Travis?”

His shoulders slumped and Farrah gave one of them a consoling pat as he answered her.

“On an army base under attack by vampires while you were stealing a nuclear weapon.”

“Exactly. You can’t drop everything just because there’s a dinosaur invasion or a zombie army or a hole in the side of the universe.”

“Or a bunch of world-shaping doom golems,” Clive added.

“Travis, you know how Jason got in those last days on Earth,” Farrah said. “That’s what happens when you obsess over the job. You have to learn to let go of the things you can’t do anything about, and sometimes even the ones you can. Otherwise, it’ll hollow you out and you can’t help anyone.”

Back on the terrace, Dawn looked at the remainder of Jason’s team.

“What I have to ask of you is not fair,” she said. “And it requires trust I have no way to demonstrate is well-founded. I need to tell you what I need and I need you to not ask questions, or respond at all. Do you understand?”

The team showed various levels of confusion and dissatisfaction, but they all nodded silently.

“Thank you. I am going to leave this world, some time shortly after Jason awakes. The next time you see me again, you need to do what I say no questions, no hesitation. No matter who you have to leave behind. You have to get Clive to move with you, along with any other allies you have on hand that you completely trust. Until then, you can’t tell Clive or Jason or even discuss it amongst yourselves. I can’t tell you why and I can’t tell you why I can’t tell you why. I need you to accept it, never talk about it after you leave this room and do your best not to dwell on it at all.”

There was a long moment of silence before someone spoke.

“That’s... pretty uninformative,” Neil said.

“You said ‘no matter who we have to leave behind,’” Humphrey said. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“You’ll like it even less when the time comes,” Dawn said. “But you have to do it.”

“But you can’t tell us why,” Sophie said.

“That’s right,” Dawn said. “It’s a risk even telling you this much, but I want you to be as prepared as you can be.”

“How do we prepare for something we know nothing about?” Humphrey asked.

“You get stronger. When the time comes, if you aren’t gold-rank, your chances go from small to none.”

“Chances at what?” Belinda asked.

“At something you will attempt regardless of what I say here,” Dawn said. “There is only a very slender opening for even the potential of success, and I am trying to help you thread that needle.”

“How long do we have to get ready?” Humphrey asked.

“More than a decade. Less than two.”

“That’s feasible,” Humphrey said. “Not easy, but with sufficient dedication, it can be done. It doesn’t leave time for other pursuits.”

“No,” Dawn said. “You need to be adventurers, and only adventurers.”

“What do we tell Jason and Clive? They won’t go more than ten years without noticing us push.”

“Tell them it’s something you need them to do and you can’t tell them why. It’s an unpleasant task, I can assure you, but a necessary one. They trust you and will go along.”

“Why?” Neil asked. “I know you said not to ask, but what does the World-Phoenix get out of this?”

“The World-Phoenix has an interest in Jason Asano because he is helping its agenda. That interest has protected Asano from other forces that would otherwise involve themselves with him. His lack of power, relative to the scope of events he has become a reluctant participant in, make him a valuable game piece. The moment the World-Phoenix is done with him, that protection ends. That’s when you’ll see me again, acting not on behalf of the World-Phoenix but myself. At that moment, you will need to be gold-rank or you won’t qualify to even try and help him. Diamond-rank would be better, but gold will at least allow you to set foot on the path.”

Dawn frowned.

“I’ve already said more than I intended. Every word I share with you is a danger. I’m going to go, but I hope you forget what I’ve told you today.”

“You haven’t told us anything,” Sophie said.

“I’ve told you everything,” Dawn said. “That’s why you cannot share any of this, especially with Clive and Jason. They will likely see through my evasions and bring disaster. Do *not* speak of this with Clive. Don’t even tell Jason this discussion took place. I’ll say again: do not even discuss this with each other. Do your best to not dwell on what I’ve told you at all and focus on growing stronger.”

Dawn didn’t even bother to use the door, leaving via the balcony as flaming wings appeared on her back before she shot away through the air.

Belinda wandered over to the balcony and looked out, the diamond-ranker already gone.

“What in the sweet teats of the Lizard goddess was that about?”

“No,” Jason said, in the feeble voice of an old man. “The clown is the bad guy.”

Gordon’s orbs flickered in a rapid, blue and orange strobe, gently pulsing both aura and light. Jason wasn’t sure if he could understand it because his language ability had undergone a second evolution or if his bond with Gordon was stronger, but he didn’t especially care. The answer would be somewhere in the slate of system messages waiting for him when he had woken up. He’d immediately pushed them aside, more interested in seeing his familiars who had immediately emerged in his waking.

He had tried to will the cloud house to turn his bed into a reclining chair, but the moment he attempted to circulate mana in his body it was wracked with pain. He was left lying in the cloud bed, his head sticking out like he was in a bubble bath, except all the bubbles were black. Shade and Gordon floated over him while Colin’s blood-clone form sat on the edge of the bed.

Colin had let out a nails-on-a-chalkboard alien screech.

“I know you have been, buddy,” Jason told him, feebly patting the familiar’s arm. “You’re always a good boy.”

Gordon had started flickering his orbs in the strange light-aura code language, wanting to encourage Jason with his favourite movie.

“Still with this?” Jason asked. “The clown is not the hero. He’s an interdimensional entity that eats people.”

He looked at Colin and Gordon.

“I’m talking to the wrong people about this. Shade, back me up on this.”

“I haven’t seen the film,” Shade said. “Is Ralph Fiennes in it?”

“No,” Jason said.

"That's a shame," Shade said. "I like Ralph Fiennes. It always feels like he's playing a butler, even when he isn't."

"Of course he does," Jason said. "What's his actual last name again?"

"Twisleton-Wykeham-Fiennes," Shade said. "I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"Does that family line have its own Wikipedia page for being excessively British?"

"It is not for being excessively British," Shade said. "It may be true that they adopted the name through an Act of Parliament, but that is hardly the point. More importantly, were you going through my browser history?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Jason said.

He gently moved his head to look around the room. It was a plain black cube with a plain black bed in it.

The cloud house had taken on darker iterations before and Jason could replace the white with a black motif offset by bright blue and orange. He generally preferred the pastel sunset colours, however. This new monochrome black was not to his taste, but if a chair gave him trouble, he wasn't about to try and reshape the whole house.

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "You have some rather anxious visitors. Shall I open the door?"

"I don't know if I'm up to that," Jason said. "I'm not feeling so—"

"Gary has scones."

"Well, of course, they can come in. Wait, am I naked?"

"...and then the submersible mysteriously sank and I have no idea what happened to it," Belinda explained.

"It mysteriously sank?" Jason asked.

"Yes," Belinda confirmed conspicuously jerking her head in Humphrey's direction. "I definitely only used it as an escape vessel and did not stash it away to sell to Clive."

"I just said I was interested in taking a look," Clive said. "I am not buying a stolen submarine."

"Good, because I definitely don't have one," Belinda said.

"I'm sorry I was too laid up to come help with the Purity stronghold."

"Yeah," Neil said. "We're off doing all the work while you're spending the whole week taking a nap. Talk about lazy." Jason's chuckle quickly turned into a pained grunt.

"Ow. Not loving the whole pathetically feeble situation I have going on here."

"My mother and Carlos Quilido will be here in not too long," Rufus said.

"Carlos is in town? Liara called him in? It's nice when people in power actually listen to your suggestions."

"Perhaps the trick is for your suggestions to be something other than shoving things into places they do not want those things shoved," Humphrey pointed out.

"There's probably something in that."

"They aren't here now because all that can help you at this point is rest," Neil said. "They and the rest of a full Church of the Healer contingent are working on Gibson Amouz."

"You got him out alive then?" Jason asked. "But worse for wear, from the sounds of it. Did the bad guys do their creepy purification thing on him?"

"They were in the process when we found him," Clive said. "An early stage, so far as anyone can tell. That ritual they were using was fiendishly complex. Just figuring out how to stop it without killing him immediately was no small challenge."

"How long did it take him?" Jason asked.

"Nine minutes," Sophie said.

"So you say," Neil said bitterly. "I still think it was ten, but it was your boyfriend checking the watch."

"Lost a bet?" Jason asked.

Neil grumbled instead of giving a response.

"I will not have my integrity impugned," Humphrey said.

"Was that even your watch?" Neil asked. "That didn't look like your watch."

"No," Humphrey said. "Sophie gave me one she got from Beli—"

Sophie's hand clamped over Humphrey's mouth.

"It was a perfectly normal watch," she said.