

Chapter 594

Goodbyes

Jason and Dawn were standing in front of the arch that would take them out of his soul space and back into normal reality.

“Worried about giving up god-like power?” Dawn asked.

“Oddly, no. I feel like maybe not having limits isn’t so good for my mentality. I think I’m starting to understand why the World-Phoenix wanted to keep you grounded with mortal sensibility.”

Unhappiness crossed Dawn's face and uncertainty entered her body language. It startled Jason because even though it was subtle, it was not something he'd seen from her before.

“It’s time for you to go isn’t it?” he asked.

She nodded.

“I’ve lingered longer than I should have. I want to say goodbye to you here. I'm not influenced by my star seed right now, but it goes further than that. I've allowed myself to change lately. Indulged in simple pleasures. But once I walk through that gate, it's time to put those things aside and look to the future.”

They faced each other, Jason taking her hands in his.

“There was always a clock on this,” he said. “We knew that from the start. I don’t think either of us would have pursued it otherwise. When will I see you again?”

“The less you know about that, the better. And after you do, it'll be hard for you. Some things I don't have the power to fight.”

She smiled.

“But you're the guy who fights them anyway. I've done my best to help you, but it's on you to do the impossible. Again. In the coming years, enjoy yourself, but also get strong. As strong as you can, as fast as you can. When the time comes, you're going to need all the strength you can muster.”

“Don’t I always?”

Jason and Dawn emerged from the portal. Jason’s top hat and tuxedo, disintegrated immediately, leaving him naked just as Humphrey came around a corner.

“Did I hear the thwip sound of a portal opening? Finally. How long were you intending to...”

Humphrey took in the naked Jason.

“STASH! I thought we’d moved past—”

“Actually, I’m the genuine article,” Jason, pulling a hat from his inventory to hide his modesty. Behind Humphrey, a naked, moustachioed Jason sprinted past.

“WOOO!”

Jason was a little uneasy, having watched Dawn change after she left his soul space. Her star seed reconnected, but as Dawn had said, there was more to it than that. It was like she put on a mask, with the relaxed Dawn of the last few weeks disappearing under the guise of the Hierophant of the World-Phoenix. In some ways, Dawn had left the moment she emerged from the portal, even if she had yet to actually go.

Jason did pick up some odd vibes between Dawn and the others through their auras, but something in Dawn’s aura felt like a warning. It was subtle and barely there, enough that only he would sense it. It flashed a warning of danger and he didn’t interrogate the idea further.

Dawn’s final farewell was on the balcony of Jason’s personal suite, just himself, Dawn and Farrah. The time that the trio had been companions on Earth hadn’t been that long, but it had felt like it was the three of them against the cosmos. While she had made her goodbyes with the others, they did not have the same connection, despite what Clive’s dismay suggested.

Jason watched Dawn and Farrah share their final words, but Farrah, like Jason, recognised the Dawn that was their friend had already gone. Wings of flame lit up on Dawn’s back and she flew into the air. She ascended blindingly fast, until even their silver-rank eyes could spot nothing but a glow, rising into the sky.

“It’s almost a flare, signalling the end of the monster surge and our issues with the Builder,” Farrah observed.

“The monster surge, maybe. I can’t help but think we’ll run into the Builder and his lackeys again.”

“Not me,” Farrah said. “If you want to go off having insane cosmic adventures, that’s on you. Look at who I’m talking to: of course you will.”

“I think I’m ready for some more grounded adventures. Even Dawn said I’ll get the chance, at least for a while. If I can only settle all this attention on me. You ready for some nice, clean adventuring?”

“Actually, no,” Farrah told him. He turned from where he had been watching Dawn’s light disappear into the sky and looked at her, resisting the urge to peek at her emotions through her aura.

“Rufus and Gary have both found callings outside of adventuring,” Farrah said.

“You could join our team,” Jason said. “We’d all love to have you.”

“I know. But while you have been going through all of the usual crazy stuff, Travis and I have been working on something.”

“Oh?”

Two chairs and a table formed from cloud material and an avatar brought out a tray of biscuits and tea as they sat down.

“You know that Travis has been spending a lot of time at the temple of Knowledge?”

“I had a vague idea. Honestly, I haven’t kept as good a track of what Travis and Taika have been up to as I should. He’s found religion?”

“Not quite, although Knowledge certain has an appeal for him. No, he’s been in discussions with the church about magitech, from Earth.”

“It is his specialty.”

“Knowledge doesn’t like people who don’t know what they’re talking about injecting new information to the world’s knowledge pool,” Farrah said. “Travis has been negotiating how much of his knowledge he’s allowed to start introducing here. How much he grasps with sufficient comprehension that it won’t cause problems when he starts teaching it. The goddess won’t let someone start spreading around concepts that are flat-out wrong. You do that in a completely new field of study and you’ll introduce falsehoods that might linger through centuries of subsequent research before they’re disproven.”

“That feels like it’s directed at me, but sure.”

“Why would that be directed at you?”

“I tried to tell Clive about gravity once. The goddess got a bit snippy. Or maybe that was Gabrielle. I don’t think she likes me.”

“When was this?”

“It was the day Emir arrived in Greenstone. Formally arrived, anyway; I’d already met him. That would make it just before you died.”

“And Emir showed up early to meet you?”

“I think Rufus had been talking me up. Did I never tell you about any of this?”

“You’ve always been a bit reticent about the time around my death. And you weren’t recording a lot then, either.”

“Right. Anyway, where do you come in on this business with Travis and Knowledge?”

“Do you remember how impressed I was with the grid on Earth?”

“Sure.”

“My world has similar warning systems, but they are far less elegant. They require much more upkeep and a higher level of magic. In low-magic areas like Greenstone, they don’t work at all.”

“But Earth is much lower-magic than Greenstone.”

“Exactly. And because magical formations are *my* specialty, I was able to learn vast amounts during my time on Earth. Not enough to replicate the grid, but I learned a lot of concepts that can revolutionise wide-area magical connections in this world.”

“So, you’re going to refurbish this world’s alarm systems?”

“That’s a part of it. A small part, really. The main thing I’m going to do is start a business with Travis.”

“A business?”

“Telecommunications. Were going to take everything I know and everything he knows and magic up something like a mobile phone network. Less technology and more magic, but basically a phone network. Were going to start with static connection points, like landlines, but transmitted over relay towers. It’s going to leave water-link communication in the dust.”

“The water link system does seem fairly limited.”

“Not to mention expensive and inconvenient. Now that the monster surge is winding down, we’re looking at a pilot program here in the Sea of Storms, as a proof of concept. We’re going to place towers in fortress towns so they don’t get taken down by roaming monsters.”

“Having reliable communication in the fortress towns would have saved a lot of lives during the surge.”

“Which is why the Sea of Storms government is backing the project.”

“The royal family?”

“No, the actual government administration. You know, Jason, the way you live your life is giving you a pretty skewed vision of the world.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you’re increasingly thinking like a gold-ranker. Maybe even a diamond-ranker.”

“How so?”

“If you wanted to get some help with something to do with government organisation, who would you go to for help.”

“I don’t know. Liara, maybe? Soramir, if it was important.”

“Jason, before this monster surge, Soramir was a near-mythical figure. And Liara is both a princess of the realm and one of the highest-ranking Adventure Society officials in the nation. Do you even know anyone lower rank than her?”

“Of course I do.”

“By name?”

“Sure, uh, yeah, Vidal. Vidal Ladv. He came out to our boat to introduce us to surge protocols. And then he showed up right before the underwater complex thing? I forget why?”

“Do debrief Sophie. She got ambushed on a contract.”

“They send people to talk to you about that? When I was ambushed, they didn't debrief me.”

“Did they try only for you to tell them no in colourful fashion?”

“That does sound about right. But they were the ones who set me up to get ambushed, plus they watched the whole thing, so I don't feel bad about it. But the point is, Vidal isn't high rank at all.”

“Actually, he got promoted just before the underwater complex rescue, and then a huge promotion after.”

“Sure, but when we met him he was just some admin guy telling people about the monster surge protocols. He got a promotion, though? Good for him.”

“He showed a lot of leadership, apparently, and was a huge help once the flooding happened. Which I was wondering about, by the way. You had a belt that would help you handle underwater environments, right?”

“I did.”

“Then how is it that you got washed away from the team?”

“I couldn't put it on in time.”

“Why didn't you have it on already? Or have it on one of your outfit setups that your inventory does?”

“I know that I should have in hindsight, sure.”

“So, you have it on one of your outfit setups now?”

“Probably.”

“Probably?”

“I haven't got around to it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I will.”

“It's because the belt's orange, isn't it.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Bright orange, and you don’t want it to clash with your dramatic colour scheme.”

“It’s not because it’s orange.”

“I remember when we were gearing up for underwater action, and the shopkeeper had to get that belt from the back. Your face, when he came out with it, was aghast.”

“I was not aghast.”

“If the colour isn’t a problem, maybe you should wear it all the time? There’s a lot of water in the Sea of Storms.”

“I’m not wearing an ora— I’m not wearing an *extra* belt around everywhere.”

She grinned maliciously.

“Can we please stop talking about this?”

“You got in a fight with Sophie’s mum all alone because you didn’t want to wear an orange belt.”

“Can we go back to talking about you and Travis building a phone network? If it works out, everyone in the world is going to want in on that. The Magic Society will be all over you, either trying to take over or to stop you from interfering with their water-link profits. And it’s going to be a lot of work. Pallimustus doesn’t have the industrial hubs and manufacturing standardisation of Earth. It will take decades to spread this across the globe.”

“I’m silver-rank: I have decades. There are plenty of people who don’t rush to gold rank, Jason. I’ll get there one day, but only self-improvement maniacs do it in ten years. Humphrey’s mother only just hit gold and she’s what? Fifty? Sixty? And she’s a famously active adventurer. Life has a way of finding things for you to do.”

“The things it finds for me tend to involve me needing to be as powerful as I can get, and it’s still never enough,” Jason said. “I guess I’ll have to be one of those maniacs.”

“You already are. Ever since you hit bronze, you’ve been going fast. The speed with which you hit silver, and then the silver wall, wasn’t record time, but it was faster than most. Comfortably.”

“We’ve had a lot to deal with.”

“Yeah,” Farrah said. “Jason, I know you have a lot of responsibilities. But you have other people to shoulder them with you now. You don’t need me. But if you want me to stay with you, you only have to ask.”

“No,” Jason said, shaking his head firmly. “You being there for me on Earth was more than I could ever ask for; I wouldn’t have made it through that time alone. I won’t be happy to not have you with me anymore, but I can see how excited you are by this.”

“Still, it feels a little like I’m leaving you in the lurch. I thought for a long time before I brought this up.”

“It makes sense. Gary’s a full-time smith now, and Rufus is a teacher. Your team is finding other pathways, outside of adventuring.”

“I’ve talked Rufus into staying with your team until you wind up back in Greenstone,” Farrah said. “He can help you refine your swordsmanship and get a proper handle on combat trances.”

“I will get back to Greenstone eventually,” Jason said. “But we plan to go very much the long way. I have a lot of world left to see.”

“Good. I think being a teacher will be good for him. You know how much he talks about his family running a school. But he’s got too much potential to *just* be a teacher. I want you to light a fire under him, while he's with you. Remind him of what's great about being an adventurer. Seeing the world and helping people. If he's not the one in charge, maybe he'll relax and not get so weighed down with responsibility.”

“You know, I’ve never actually seen him in action?” Jason said. “Not properly.”

“He’s a lot like you, in some ways. A lot of different pieces in his power set coming together. Adapting them to different situations and setting up big finishing moves. You two are some of the strongest combat adventurers I’ve seen, for your ranks, and you both get very comprehensive use out of your power sets. There’s probably something in that.”

“Well, he did teach me.”

“And you learned. You ask some teachers about how often that *doesn’t* happen.”