

Chapter 575

Quite a Lot of System Windows

Carlos sat on a pew, head in his hands. He felt a warm hand rest on his shoulder.

“You aren’t expected to be perfect, Carlos.”

“I hurt a man I was there to help because I was pushing him to help me kill, whatever I might have told him. And myself. What kind of a priest does that make me?”

“A human one. The power you wield might have changed you, Carlos, but you are still a mortal man. It’s not unforgivable to be selfish or to make mistakes. What you have to do now is no secret. You accept what you’ve done, make amends as best you can and you strive to do better, having learned from the experience.”

“He threw me across a room. With his aura. That’s something they can do.”

“Is that why you pushed him so hard? Because he’s like them?”

“I know he’s not one of them.”

“In your head, yes. But your heart?”

“I’m afraid that I’m going to lose my way.”

“A fear that you and Jason Asano share. Perhaps, if you can put aside your feelings about the messengers, you can help each other find the paths you need to take.”

Carlos looked around at the church service room, empty other than himself.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Jason awoke, minimising the system windows that joined the others he had pushed aside the last time he came to after passing out somewhere. He was back in a cloud bed while Arabelle watched over him from an armchair.

“If you keep mothering me,” he said in an achy croak, “then I’m going to have to marry Rufus.”

“He could do better.”

Jason laughed, bracing for the pain but found it surprisingly mild. In fact, he felt much better than he had before passing out.

“We told you that circulating your mana would accelerate recovery,” she told him. “We perhaps should have said don’t do it until you pass out, though.”

“I kind of hauled off on Carlos.”

“Do you feel bad about that?”

“Nope.”

“He’s a good man, but he gets caught up in looking to the future. If he sees a way to do good tomorrow, he sometimes overlooks the pain it takes today to get there.”

“I suppose I should be grateful he sees me as an agent instead of a victim. But he seemed pushier than what I remember. More driven. Has he run into the messengers before?”

“Yes. He lost people.”

Jason nodded.

“I know he’s trying to do what’s right. I also know how easy it is to convince yourself that you know what’s right better than everyone else. I’ve hurt people making that mistake as well.”

“You seem well balanced,” Arabelle told him. “I was worried that you would regress.”

“I’m a little fragile,” Jason said. “But not like I was. If that conversation had come right after I got back from Earth, that would be a different story. But he poked a healing wound, not an open one.”

“I’m glad. But you and I are going to talk about this at length, later.”

“I know. But I’m guessing you’re busy with those Order of Redeeming Light people.”

“Yes. Carlos has been trying to figure out how to undo what has been done to them without killing them.”

“How is that going?”

“It’s not. Trying to undo that kind of conversion, be it vampirism, vorger flesh abominations or anything else is something the Church of the Healer has pursued for centuries. Maybe millennia.”

“Maybe he’ll learn something from these order members or Gibson Amouz that can finally crack it. Better chasing that than ways to kill messengers.”

Arabelle nodded her firm agreement.

“I spoke briefly to Carlos about this, and will do so again. But I would appreciate you doing so as well. You know the feeling of having lost your way in the pursuit of worthwhile goals.”

Jason nodded.

“‘The road to hell is paved with good intentions,’ is the saying in my world. I’ll do what I can, but I could just make things worse.”

“He’s a little like you,” she said. “He can lose his way without the people around him to keep him on the path. He could use your insight, I think. And your understanding might help him avoid a bad road, be it through guilt or determination.”

Arabelle got to her feet.

“I’m assuming the hell at the end of this road you mentioned is not a good destination.”

“It does have all the good music,” Jason said.

Left alone to rest, Jason finally turned to the system windows he had been pushing aside each time he regained consciousness.

“That’s quite a lot of system windows,” he murmured to himself and started pulling them up in order.

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- You have drawn power from a [Reality Core] to make your soul produce higher-rank mana.
 - Your body and soul form a non-binary gestalt.
 - Your gestalt being is producing abnormal mana.
 - Backlash from using abnormal mana will be distributed across your gestalt being, dispersing the level of harm.
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“I remember that one.”

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- You are attempting to use [Incomplete Portal Gate]. Attempt has failed.
 - You are forcibly applying abnormal mana to [Incomplete Portal Gate]. This will result in harm to your gestalt being.
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“And that one.”

-
- You have opened a portal using an unstable medium. You are forcibly maintaining stability using large amounts of high-grade mana. Backlash from high-grade mana and harm from using an incomplete function of the cloud flask are both increased.
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“This is where it starts getting blurry.”

“Mr Asano, you are talking to yourself again,” Shade said.

“I’m talking to you. It’s a normal thing.”

“You sensed my presence?”

“Honestly, no. All I can feel is kind of a pointy tingle. If I try to move or use mana it becomes a very pointy tingle.”

“Neither ‘pointy’ nor ‘tingle’ are words one should use if they wish to be a person of decorum, Mr Asano, especially in conjunction with one another.”

“Because ‘pointy tingle’ sounds like there’s something wrong with your—”

“Yes, Mr Asano.”

Jason grinned as he pulled up the next system window.

-
- You have opened a gate to your spirit realm. The abnormal mana being produced by your gestalt being has sealed the gate. End abnormal mana production to release the gate.
-

“I think I remember this. Did I get chucked across the room?”

“Yes, Mr Asano.”

The next system window was an event log of messages about his body breaking down, interspersed with increasingly drastic actions taken to keep him alive. His grin turned into a rictus as he skimmed his way down, accessing a scroll bar that indicated the list was extremely long.

“Cut off my arms and legs?” he read.

“We wanted to cut off your head, Mr Asano, but you were unlikely to survive it.”

“That’s not a concept that really requires explanation, Shade. It’s fairly safe to assume that if you cut someone’s head off, it’ll kill them.”

“We have postulated that you could potentially survive, with Colin’s assistance.”

“Postulate meaning guess. I’m not going to check if I can survive decapitation, even if I’m guessing that I can. Also, I’d need to be in good condition for that scenario. Good for someone who doesn’t have a head anymore, obviously. I was not in good condition.”

“Which is why we did not risk it.”

Things at the bottom of the event log started getting strange. Some of the lines were written in an ideographic language that even his power to read what he thought were all languages couldn’t translate. Just making the attempt gave him a headache and sent the mana in his body cascading, triggering a sharp pain. Once it subsided, he made no further attempt to read it, skimming ahead to where normal language started appearing again.

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- You have attempted to establish a spirit domain.
 - You have already exceeded the maximum total spirit domain area.
 - You are of insufficient rank relative to the local ambient magic to establish a spirit domain.
 - You have failed to establish a spirit domain.
 - All mana used in the attempt to form a spirit domain has been expended.
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After that came more of the ideographs that he didn’t attempt to decipher, skimming down once more. This time the lines of incomprehensible language went on for excessive length. Even just skimming them Jason was getting a headache, but he also got a sense of familiarity from them that for some reason he instinctively associated with Gordon.

- You have attuned your body to resonate with the local dimensional membrane.
 - The physical emphasis of your gestalt being causing its physical/spiritual imbalance has been rectified.
 - Your ability to sense astral forces has increased.
 - You have forcibly unsealed the restricted effect of the title [Reality Hegemon].
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“Shade,” Jason said as he scrolled through screen after screen of the impenetrable ideographs. “What did Gordon do?”

“I am uncertain.”

Jason went back to scrolling through the alien script until he finally reached the end.

- Restrictions on [Fundament Gate] and [Firmament Bridge] have been removed.
 - [Fundament Gate] has been broken down.
 - [Fundament Core] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Fundamental Realm Authority Token] has been added to your inventory.
 - Your ability to control magic under the influence of [Builder] through the [Fundament Gate] has been lost.
 - Your ability to access the fundamental realm of physical realities has been lost.
 - [Firmament Bridge] has been broken down.
 - [Firmament Core] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Firmamental Bridge Anchor] has been added to your inventory.
 - Your ability to create astral constructs through the [Firmament Bridge] has been lost.
 - [Firmament Bridge] was a requirement for the [Incomplete Portal Gate] component of your [Cloud Flask]. [Incomplete Portal Gate] is no longer functional.
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“Uh, I think that might be bad.”

“Mr Asano?”

“I think my spirit realm just ate the things I needed to build the bridge linking Pallimustus and Earth. You know, the one that I have to build so that Earth doesn't become increasingly unstable and ultimately break down and be washed into oblivion.”

“That does sound less than ideal, Mr Asano. Perhaps some of the other system windows will offer a solution.”

Jason pulled up the next window as Shade suggested.

- You have an incomplete spirit realm. [Fundament Core] will automatically be consumed to establish an [Astral Throne].
- Your rank is insufficient to establish [Astral Throne].
- Abnormal mana being produced from your gestalt form is sufficient to establish [Astral Throne].
- [Fundament Core] has been consumed to establish [Astral Throne].

- You have an incomplete spirit realm. [Firmament Core] will automatically be consumed to establish an [Astral Gate].
 - Your rank is insufficient to establish [Astral Gate].
 - Abnormal mana being produced from your gestalt form is sufficient to establish [Astral Gate].
 - [Firmament Core] has been consumed to establish [Astral Gate].
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“Okay, I have no idea what any of that means. Shade, have you ever heard of an astral throne?”

“Oh dear.”

“Okay, that’s a yes. What about an astral gate?”

“I suppose it makes sense to have them both. Oh my.”

“Can you tell me about them?”

“That is probably a conversation best saved for when you can access your spirit realm, Mr Asano.”

“Can they help me solve my dissolving planet problem?”

“Perhaps the astral gate is a possibility, but this is not my field and it would be irresponsible of me to make any guesses as to the likelihood of that being the case. I believe that Hierophant Dawn is the correct person to pose those questions to.”

There were still more system windows and Jason pulled the next one up, hoping it had something to assure him that he hadn’t doomed the Earth. Unfortunately, they were all just notifications of things he already knew, like when his cloud house reflexively altered its form and when his body – which it kept calling his gestalt being – stopped producing abnormal mana.

“I think I need to talk with Dawn,” Jason said. “Do you think she’ll be cranky that I ate the magic bridge?”

“She gave you an object of great power and you used it to do something absurd, Mr Asano. If she failed to anticipate that by this stage, the shortcoming is hers.”

“That’s certainly true, but what I asked is if she’ll be cranky.”

“Yes, Mr Asano. I do believe she will.”