

Chapter 530

Tampering With That Kind of Power

Jason and Clive made their way down the stairs in the cloud house and into the waterfall room. The natural stone of the cave it occupied was hidden behind walls, floor and ceiling of cloud stuff which radiated soft, ambient light. Sparkling sunlight streamed in through the waterfall outside the cave entrance that was the only part of the underlying stone that remained visible. The room was empty of furniture, only the staircase in the middle spiralling up into the cloud house through a hole in the ceiling.

The walls were covered in cloud-stuff drawing boards that Jason could write on using his finger like a stick of chalk or even by just thinking about it. Every wall was covered in dense notes and magical diagrams, floor to ceiling, except for the cave where the waterfall rushed past. Between the water feature, the ambient lighting and the walls covered in Jason's writing, it looked like a wizard serial killer had set up his lair in a corporate lobby.

Clive immediately moved over to one of the walls and started skimming his eyes wildly over everything. Jason waited patiently, a smile on his face as Clive slowly made his way around the room.

"Who did this?" Clive asked, not taking his eyes from the walls.

"Me. I've been working on my astral magic for a while."

"Clearly. It's hard to imagine you got this far in just a few years."

"I had the books from Knowledge and Dawn gave me a lot of instruction."

Clive turned from the walls to stare at Jason.

"You had the goddess of Knowledge give you a bunch of books containing astral magic that came from the Builder and were personally instructed in it by one of the most important servants of the World-Phoenix."

"It sounds impressive when you say it like that but they all had their own agendas. None of them came to me out of the kindness of their hearts. They all needed a tool and I was the one sitting on the workbench."

Clive shook his head.

"You know that if it was me, I could have done incredible things."

"Which is exactly why they would never make it you," Jason told him. "When you're using someone you treat them like a mushroom: keep them in the dark and feed them crap. Dawn's a friend but she's still hiding things from me. As for her boss, it doesn't give a wet pile of brown about me beyond the things it needs me to do. Someone like you could peek behind the curtain in a big way so they're never going to give you the chance."

Clive nodded sadly.

“Hey, don’t worry,” Jason said. “I may be a tool, but so was Skynet. I’ll give you that chance.”

“What’s a sky net?”

“It’s a tool that people came up with that gained sentience, went rogue and enslaved what little humanity it didn’t wipe out.”

“I’m assuming that’s a story and not something that happened.”

“Yeah, just a story. The real-life version is called capitalism and it’s way more insidious.”

“Isn’t that a horrifically bad thing?”

“Capitalism? Yeah, it’s a shocker. I do like being rich, though, which is how it gets away with it. Way more effective than naked Austrian cyborgs.”

“Just to be clear, I don’t want an explanation about any of what you just said.”

“The point is that it’s a metaphor. Just because they don’t want you to see the secrets of the universe doesn’t mean that you won’t. You may not know this about me but I’m not big on doing what I’m told.”

“Yes, I’m definitely finding that out for the first time now,” Clive said drily, turning back to examine the walls again.

“You know, some of this is brilliant. A lot of it needs significant work, but even so. There are some strange flaws, though.”

“Flaws?”

“Like here,” Clive said, pointing to a diagram. “Look at the values for this dimensional resonance architecture.”

“Those values are correct,” Jason said.

“According to whom? Where did you derive them, because it’s like they’re just shoved in there.”

“They come from me and I did just shove them in there. The values are correct.”

“Where did they come from?”

“I just know them. I promise you they’re right.”

Clive turned around to face Jason again.

“You just know them?”

“Uh, yep.”

“How could you possibly just know that? The only way that could happen would be if, during your time away, you somehow gained an intrinsic insight into the underpinnings of

physical reality and how it interacts with astral forces on a cosmic scale at a profoundly fundamental level. Which would be absurd, even for you.”

Jason awkwardly shrugged as he scratched his neck and gave Clive an embarrassed smile.

“ARE YOU KIDDING ME?”

“Okay,” Jason said, holding his hands up. “So, I found this magic door...”

Clive was pacing back and forth in the waterfall room like he was trying to dig a trench by wearing down the floor.

“You’re saying that you can just feel astral forces?” he asked Jason. “We’re talking about the stuff of which the cosmos is comprised, unadulterated magic itself, and the rules that govern it. You can just shove your fat head out the side of reality and sniff around like a dog poking its head out of a carriage?”

“Fat head?”

Jason assessed his head size with his hands, his expression worried.

Jason had given his team a rundown of events on Earth but had focused on the practical and emotional issues rather than the technical ones. With just Clive present that had changed, Jason going over everything from transformation zones to spirit realms to the magic door and magical bridge absorbed into his soul. With the constant questions, it had taken hours and it was getting on time for Jason to prepare dinner.

“So, I need to go start getting ready to feed everyone,” Jason said. “I’m guessing I’m fine to leave you here?”

“I have more questions. Significantly more questions.”

“Well, just finishing looking around in here while I’m cooking and we can get back to it after dinner.”

Jason made his way up the stairs as Clive resumed examining the walls. Jason went into the cloud house then stopped and went back to the top of the stairwell.

“And no magic theory at the dinner table,” he called out.

On the balcony overlooking the cliff and the lagoon below, Jason and Farrah’s teams were sat around a long table.

“I’m happy with how this turned out,” Jason said. The people at the table nodded but didn’t pause from eating to comment. Shakshuka was a spiced tomato sauce in which eggs were poached. Gary was already digging more out of one of the pots, his first serving having mysteriously vanished.

“It’s not a traditional shakshuka,” Jason confessed. “The spices are mostly different here and the eggs don’t come from chickens. I think I’m finally getting my head around the local spices, though.”

“Yeah, this is terrible,” Neil mumbled around a mouthful of food. “Give me that pot and I’ll take it away for you.”

Rufus conjured a golden blade and sat it on the table.

“Or I could leave it there,” Neil said.

After the food was done and the dishes cleared away, the table and chairs transformed into loungers as the group laid back to enjoy the evening. The exception was Clive who immediately left the moment dinner was done.

“How did the debrief go?” Gary asked Humphrey and Rufus.

“Frustratingly,” Humphrey said. “We aren’t going to be a part of the investigation into what happened.”

“Traitors are always a contentious problem,” Rufus said. “They want to use people they trust rather than outsiders.”

“They should be using outsiders,” Sophie said. “People can’t betray you if you didn’t trust them in the first place.”

“This has to be the church of Purity right?” Neil said. “They’ve been running around doing gods-know-what while the rest of us have been dealing with the Builder.”

“I don’t see how the purity church got almost all of the essence users in a town to turn,” Humphrey said. “Purity adherents are outcasts now.”

“Desperation,” Belinda said. “You’ve never tasted the desperation of being hungry and powerless and there being nothing you can do about it, Humphrey. When you’re huddled behind walls that feel increasingly flimsy with every passing day, you don’t care about the issues of the powerful people beyond that they were meant to send you food that never arrived.”

“So they just turn around and betray their kingdom and their people?”

“The people in the gutter don’t care about the people in the temples and the palaces,” Sophie said. “Take it from someone who spent a lot of time in one.”

“If the people in the fortress towns had power or influence or wealth,” Belinda said, “they wouldn’t be in fortress towns. They don’t care about the Builder or Purity or the king. The conflicts of guilds and priests and aristocrats mean nothing to them. They just know that they’re hungry and probably going to die.”

“If someone shows up and offers them the help they need when they need it most,” Sophie said, “they won’t care where the help comes from. Great astral beings, dark gods.

Those are the problems of people like us, not people like them. They want secure walls and full bellies and they don't care who gives it to them."

"But we're not talking about the regular civilians," Humphrey argued. "They were slaughtered. It was the people who should have been protecting them that turned. They are concerned about aristocrats and guilds and temples."

"I think you might be overestimating the social strata of these towns, Humphrey," Jason said. "I've seen quite a few of them at this point. Some do have mid-tier aristocrats trying to do the right thing but mostly these are rural nobility who maybe visit Rimaros twice a decade. Core users doing the best they can."

"I agree with Humphrey," Rufus said. "I can buy that you might convince some, maybe even most essence users in a fortress town to throw in with the church of Purity if things get desperate enough. You pick the right town with the right people in it and sure, that's possible. But what we saw doesn't support that. We only found four essence users in the whole town, all iron-rank. That means that all the others turned. All of them. And not just reluctantly, either. Belinda, Farrah. The town defences took time to be undermined the way they were, right?"

"That's right," Farrah said. "It wouldn't be quick and there's no way you get away with it without someone noticing what you're up to. Everyone in that place with any knowledge of artifice at all had to be involved."

"What we found wasn't the result of traitors against people who stayed loyal, which is what we would expect if many or even most of them turned to Purity," Rufus said. "Maybe there were signs covered up by the monster attacks but I have to imagine there would be more left behind than four dead iron-rankers, even if the traitors staged an ambush."

"Jason," Gary said. "When you told us about the Purity people that ambushed you, you mentioned that there was an elf, but their aura read as human, right?"

"That's right," Jason said. "It was weird, but I was pretty distracted at the time. She's locked up in the Builder response unit's secure section of the Adventure Society now. Liara kept saying that she'd send me in to talk to them at some point but I think that was put on the low priority list with all the Builder stuff going on."

"That priority is probably about to change," Rufus said. "The Builder threat in the Sea of Storms is largely neutralised so they're bringing Purity church activity into the Builder response unit's scope of operation, just for the Storm Kingdom."

"The Adventure Society thinks it's the Purity church too, then," Neil said.

"They're right," Gary said. "That elf who's a human on the inside; I've seen something like that before. The aura of a human but the body of something else."

“That must have been before we teamed up,” Rufus said.

“It was. Jason, do you remember the day we met, walking across the desert after escaping that sacrifice chamber.”

“You mean the day I was sucked into another universe, found out magic is real, almost got sacrificed by a cult, killed a bunch of people, found a cannibal kitchen and got magic powers? It rings a bell.”

“We were talking about the different races of the world because you didn’t know them. I mentioned that humans can sometimes act superior.”

“I vaguely remember that. It was a busy day and I think my brain was bleeding at that point. I got hit in the head a lot.”

“When I was growing up, this extremist group of Purity people were operating not far from the village where I grew up. There’s a big town nearby, the local trading hub on the river. The Order of the Redeeming Light, they called themselves. They had this thing about non-humans being impure. These were deep in it, you know? The kind that made Anisa look relaxed.”

“That doesn’t sound likely,” Jason said.

“They wouldn’t have even put up with her,” Gary said. “Because she was an elf. Non-human. Unclean. But they had a thing they did. I don’t know the details, but it was some ritual. The fire of purification or something. They were taking volunteers and turning them human on the inside. Only elves and celestines, though. The ones that look pretty to humans. There were deaths around that time amongst the leonids that people said were these priests, but I don’t know. In the end, more of what you’d call regular Purity priests showed up and moved them out of town. Looking back, though, it seems a lot like they only showed up once that extreme order had gotten as much as they were getting.”

“And people volunteered for this?” Neil asked.

“Supposedly,” Gary said. “They went weird, afterwards, though. Joined that order, left their families. It was bad, but I was just a kid so there was a lot that people wouldn’t tell me. I don’t think all those people signed up voluntarily, though. Why would they? Months later, adventurers came through to investigate the whole thing. I never found out what came of it.”

“Great,” Jason said. “Magical pod people. Looking forward to this.”

“It might be time for you to push Liara about getting in to see those Purity adherents,” Farrah said to Jason.”

“You’ll get your chance tomorrow,” Humphrey said. “Liara will be briefing us on our next contract.”

“What is it that you’re attempting to accomplish with all this?” Clive asked as Jason came down the stairs into the waterfall room. “I’ve figured out that you’re trying to boost or link something, maybe both.”

“I told you about the door and the bridge in my soul,” Jason said.

“Yeah. I’m not sure that messing about inside your soul is the best idea.”

“That ship sailed a long time ago, my friend. While Farrah and I were travelling between worlds, my soul was serving as our dimensional vessel. I could feel the astral around me; the dimensional forces washing over me as I passed through them. It’s a big part of where my insights into astral magic come from and I’m still working on merging what I know with theory I understand.”

“That’s what I figured from your explanation earlier,” Clive said excitedly, “and I had an idea about that. These instincts of yours would be ideal for troubleshooting certain astral magic experiments—”

“Hold on there, Clive. Maybe let me finish explaining one thing before you go all Nazi rocket scientist on another.”

“What’s a... wait, why would I ask you that? Just go on with your explanation.”

“I’m happy to explain the reference.”

“No, I’m fine, thank you.”

“Oh,” Jason said, disappointed. “Anyway, while I was passing through the astral, guided by this bridge inside me, I started thinking about what else it could be used for. The whole reason this door and bridge were made was to stabilise the two worlds, but isn’t using them for just that and nothing else a waste?”

“Jason, we’re talking about objects forged by great astral beings. As exciting as these opportunities are, do you want to go tampering with that kind of power?”

“Clive, these objects don’t just belong to me. They’re a part of me and not a part I’m willing to let go to waste. I know that I’ll be gold, maybe even diamond-rank before I can start fully leveraging them to my own ends but we don’t have to be that ambitious right now. Baby steps. What if we just used them to boost my portal power? Nothing over the top; just bumping up the range and number of people who can go through at a time. Not even that much. It might help us get out of a hairy situation but really it’s a test of what we can do with these things in the future. A careful first step.”

Clive snorted derision.

“Careful my throbbing magic wand. Jason, bumping up the power of one of your essence abilities is a bad idea. If it’s operating at a higher level than your soul can handle,

it'll be like a poison or a disease, slowly eating away at you. It would be like the aftermath of eating a spirit coin except the effects would last longer and longer each time you used the power until eventually becoming permanent. I've seen the results of experiments like that and it's ugly. There's a reason the people who conduct them get hunted down."

"That's why we need a medium to channel the extra power through," Jason said.

"That won't work. The door and the bridge are in your soul. It has to be the medium."

"I thought of that."

Jason walked to the edge of the room and patted the wall.

"The cloud house is a spirit domain. I know I explained the concept but I'm not sure I managed to get across the degree to which the cloud house is a part of me now. I'm talking about adding a function to it that lets me create a portal room that will boost my portal power. Maybe even those of other people once we figure out how to make it work for me."

Clive rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You think that you have enough of a connection to your cloud flask to make it work?"

"Enough that I'm willing to try."

"You do realise that even if we figure out how to add this as an upgrade to your cloud flask, the materials we have you feed it will be ridiculously rare and expensive, right?"

"Yep. I've figured out the obvious ones, though, and I've brought a lot of them already. Did I mention I'm super-rich?"

"How rich?"

"This one time, I killed and looted Dawn."

"WHAT?"