

## Chapter 576

### Reasons to Quietly Dread

Jason's body was rigid and tense, trembling with pain as he channelled mana, teeth gritted and fists clenched. Forcefully cycling mana through the matrix that was the magical framework on which his body was built accelerated Jason's recovery. This made the massive quantities of mana required to form new bodies for Shade the perfect physical and magical therapy.

Jason let about a groan of relief as a new Shade body manifested and he could finally take a pause. His whole body slumped as he let himself settle deeper into the plush recliner that enfolded him like an armchair made of marshmallows. The cloud-substance it was made from was fluffy white with blue and orange embellishments, much like the rest of the room. Another exercise Jason was using was modifying the cloud house, although he'd only done his recovery room thus far.

"One more?" he asked with a strained voice.

"No, that's enough for now," Neil told him. "Pushing yourself to an appropriate level and then getting back to it after a rest will be better for your recovery than going until you pass out. Farrah made me promise not to let you overdo it, and she was right to do so. Most people try to slack off through a process this painful, not keep going."

"Pain's been a companion longer than you have, Neil. I like you more."

"Oh, you find me to be a better companion than excruciating pain. That's very gratifying."

"Oh, definitely," Jason said. "You're in the top twenty for sure."

"I'm in the top twenty companions in a six-person team?"

"Thirteen person team, when you count familiars, then there's Rufus and his team, Alejandro Albericci—"

"Who?"

"The guy who put my new wardrobe together."

"The tailor counts as a companion?"

"I wear his work everywhere. Then there's Clive's wife."

"Clive's wife is imaginary!"

"Yeah," Jason said, shaking his head sadly. "Poor bloke. But that's why she's barely above you."

"If you're talking this much nonsense," Neil said, "You're clearly getting back to your old self. Gods help us. I'm going to leave you to rest."

As Neil reached the door, Jason called his name. As it lacked the usual joking tone, it arrested Neil's attention.

"Thank you," Jason said softly.

"It's my role," Neil told him.

"Yeah, well, you do it well."

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Jason hobbled in a slow circle around the room, grateful for the soft floor under his aching feet.

"Shade, how is it that I can handle flooding my body with pain, but can barely put up with sore feet?"

"As I find myself at a loss to answer within the bounds of polite conversation, Mr Asano, I shall decline to answer."

"Shade, did you just call me a wuss?"

"I quite explicitly didn't call you anything, Mr Asano."

"Yes, but we both know the inferences you conjure up are more deadly than the swords Humphrey does."

"Thank you, Mr Asano."

Jason returned to the recliner at the centre of the room, wanting to collapse but lowering himself slowly.

"Shade, now that I'm recovering, albeit slowly, my senses are starting to return. I couldn't even tell what was going on with myself, at first. Now I'm starting to come to grips with the changes I've gone through, and I think I know why I've been feeling some uncharacteristic awkwardness from you."

"My apologies, Mr Asano. You should not be getting additional problems from me when you are already have enough to—"

"You don't owe me apologies or explanations, Shade. I've had to deal with a lot over the last few years, and none of that would have been possible without you. Did your dad send you to me just so I could free the souls trapped inside the flesh abominations, or was it because of the larger concerns involving the World-Phoenix and the Builder?"

"I honestly do not know."

"Did you get the option of saying no?"

"I did. My... what you might call siblings, are not curious by nature. Their interests begin and end in serving the Reaper. They only accept a position as a familiar if it serves the Reaper's interests. I am an outlier in having been a familiar so many times through my desire to explore the cosmos."

“Which is why being bound to that astral space for all that time must have been bloody awful for you. Nowhere to go and with no more companions than the vorger and the tormented souls trapped inside flesh monsters.”

“That was only a short time, in the scope of my existence, Mr Asano.”

“Yeah, but time doesn’t go faster just because you have a lot of it. But I guess that’s why you didn’t make the same choice as Colin and Gordon. I’m the latest in a long line of people you’ve had as a summoner, and there’ll be many more after. You’re kind of like Doctor Who and I’m one of your companions.”

Shade didn’t respond, Jason feeling the awkwardness in his familiar’s aura growing.

“It’s alright Shade. I mostly brought it up because I want to understand what is happening. I can feel that my bond with Colin and Gordon is stronger and I can feel that they both chose that. I’m not sure how or why it happened, though.”

“It is because of the changes in your spirit realm, Mr Asano. The astral throne and the astral gate in your spirit realm will give you much greater control over the spirit domains you have formed. As you are aware, you created the ones you already have by accident.”

“This is starting get confusing,” Jason said.

“It will only become more complicated, Mr Asano. Your spirit realm is the reality that exists inside you and your power is, for any practical intent, absolute. Your spirit domains are the territories you have claimed spiritually, imprinting your authority on. The one in Slovakia and the one in France.”

“I never intended to. I just wanted the transformation zones to not blast a hole in the side of the universe and wipe out the planet.”

“Nonetheless, Mr Asano, those territories were claimed. But they are crude, like a bowl made with bare hands from river clay. An astral throne and an astral gate are the sculpting tools, the potter's wheel and the kiln you need to transform the crude clay into an immaculate bowl.”

“And that somehow allows my familiars to grow a deeper bond with me?”

“The astral throne gives you the power to create avatars within your spirit domains. You were already doing this unconsciously, although I was unsure what was happening until you informed me that you possessed an astral throne. Your familiars are automatically invited to bond themselves to you as avatars. I felt the draw but was uncertain as to its source.”

“What kind of bond are we talking, exactly?”

“A permanent one, Mr Asano. A summoned familiar is only connected to you for as long as the summoned vessel lasts. With each new vessel you call up, be it because the

old one was destroyed or you've ranked up, the familiar can choose to let some other astral entity occupy the vessel. The vessel will have the same powers, but the entity within will be a different one.

"Yeah," Jason said. "I appreciate that you three have all stuck with me through some fairly wonky events. Is quitting as a familiar common? I can't help thinking about Noreth."

Noreth, who Jason had most known as Mr North, had come to Jason's world as the familiar to a returning outworlder, the Network founder. After centuries together and an ideological falling out, the bond had been severed and Noreth ended up selling out his former bond companion. The Network founder had been captured by the United States branches of the very organisation he had founded, leading to the USA becoming dominant within the wider Network.

"Summoned familiars rarely end their tenure with such acrimony, even when there is a falling out," Shade explained. "The connection is not as integral as with a bonded familiar, and the summoned familiar is rarely in true danger through inhabiting a vessel. The vessel being destroyed costs them little beyond time and annoyance. Most familiars stay with the summoner throughout the summoner's life unless there is a major divergence of principle. To serve as a familiar gives us power, especially as the familiar of a high-ranker."

"What kind of power are you getting, exactly?"

"Trying to explain the nature of a purely astral existence to a physical entity is not possible. Even with your insight into astral forces, physical entities lack the capacity to conceptualise a manner of existence that involves no physical reality at all. Pure magic is too alien, its principles too fluid. You simply just aren't equipped to conceive of the concepts involved, let alone, comprehend them. Trying to explain them would be like trying to get a pebble to appreciate poetry or you to be quietly anonymous."

"Oh, that's hilarious."

"Mr Asano, we are in a clifftop temple you build to yourself while unconscious and projecting a kilometre high image of your inner soul."

"That was an accident."

"Yes, Mr Asano, but you do seem rather accident-prone."

"How about we go back to talking about familiar bonds."

"Very wise, Mr Asano. As I explained, an astral throne allows you to form avatars, but they are restricted to your spirit domains. But others bonded to you can deepen that bond to also serve as avatars, allowing them to be your agents outside of your spirit domains.

But that bond is forever. Colin and Gordon accepted that bond the moment it became available.”

Jason nodded.

“I understand why you didn’t,” Jason said. “If anything, I don’t understand why Colin and Gordon jumped in so quickly. You’re all so old I can’t even comprehend it, and we’ve only known each other a few short years. Shade, I know you feel awkward about not taking that bond, but there’s no need. With everything you’ve done for me, you’ve earned more gratitude than I’ll ever be able to pay back. Even if you choose to not return, the next time I summon a vessel, that’s okay. You’ll still be my friend and that’s the only expectation I have of you.”

Shade stood in silence for a long time before finally speaking.

“You do not have to pay me back for any gratitude you feel, Mr Asano. Friends do not count favours.”

Jason grinned.

“Good. Now, let’s talk about how you missed that I’d picked up an astral throne. With all your knowledge, between the weird guys the cloud house was producing and the bond call, shouldn’t someone as experienced and knowledgeable as you have realised?”

“That you obtained an astral throne in the middle of attempting to not explode? No, Mr Asano. That is utterly absurd, even by your standards.”

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Jason had several reasons to quietly dread Dawn arriving for a talk. One was that he strongly suspected that it would be the last time he saw her in a long time, if not forever. He'd had his fill of extended separations from his friends and had no interest in going through it again, but of course, Dawn could not stay. Aside from having her own responsibilities, the power disparity was far too great for her to be slumming it with Jason and his companions. She was no longer a silver-rank avatar that could fight side-by-side with Farrah.

Another reason was that he was worried about the reaction, not of Dawn, but of her boss to the destruction of the artefacts Jason had absorbed into his soul. Now they were broken down entirely, their power fully absorbed and their original purposes rendered non-functional. There was no telling what that meant for the World-Phoenix's agenda and what it would do to Jason as a result.

Related to this was the fear that Jason had doomed the Earth to destruction. He didn’t believe the great astral beings would allow that to happen just because of an inconsequential entity like Jason, but they could also just cut their losses and move on.

What was a single planet to them beyond one of a trillion, trillion pawns in a game so vast that Jason couldn't even see the square he was positioned on?

Jason was unsure about what was to come, but he suspected it would hinge on the two items in his inventory that had been looted from the destruction of the artefacts. He'd looked at them many times since he'd gotten strong enough to open his inventory and read the descriptions, although he was still too weak to move objects in or out. He opened his inventory yet again to reread the description of the first item.

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Item: [Fundamental Realm Authority Token] (transcendent rank, unavailable)

*Symbol of authorisation to modify physical reality (decree, token).*

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and can only be used by [Jason Asano] and [Zithis Carrow Vayel].
- Effect: Gives the wielder the authority to open gates to the fundamental realm of any physical reality.

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Many things about the description left Jason wondering. From the description, it gave him the authority to access the underlying foundations of reality; the strange realm where reality cores could be picked up like cabbages and the fundamental aspects of the universe could be modified. It was a place he had accessed many times on Earth, undoing the damage the Network founder had done centuries before.

Similar work needed to be done in Pallimustus as well, albeit on a smaller scale. It was necessary to build the bridge that would save the Earth, but the authority to enter that realm wasn't enough. It didn't matter if he was allowed to open the gates if he lacked the power to do so. That ability had been lost by destroying the magic door artefact in his soul; the same one from which the token he now looked at had been looted.

There was also the rank of the item. Even the transcendent rank items he had seen in the past were listed as legendary, but this one listed the rarity as unavailable. That suggested he *really* wasn't meant to have it, which made him wonder who would be coming to take it away.

The last thing was the name, Zithis Carrow Vayel. The item was bound to Jason because he had looted it; because and the thing he looted it from was a part of his soul, or a bit of both. That left the question of who this Zithis person was and why they could use it as well. Jason was hoping it was the name of the Network founder who had gone to Earth centuries before, using the magic door Jason had ultimately absorbed to set in motion the events Jason was attempting to bring an end to.

It didn't strike Jason as a very Earth-like name, even for ye olden days. That was a strike against it, as the founder had been a returned outworlder, like himself. Jason hoped he was wrong, though, because he could only think of one other alternative. If it was the original name of the Builder, from when he was a mortal, Jason didn't imagine knowing it would bode well for him in general. For all he knew, the great astral beings would collectively annihilate him for peeking behind the curtain at one of their number.

Jason looked at the other item, which was largely obscured.

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Item: [Firmamental Bridge Anchor] (transcendent rank, legendary)

???. (consumable, ???).

- Effect: ???.
- Uses remaining: 1/1

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The familiar obfuscation was comforting. In the past, he'd been annoyed about transcendent items having their descriptions hidden from him, but having one revealed only made him feel worse. Seeing the question marks in the descriptions suddenly felt like putting on a comfy woollen jumper he found after thinking he'd lost it.

Looking at the question marks, suddenly his head spiked with pain, like when he'd tried reading the strange, alien script that had been in his event log. Suddenly Jason had a very bad feeling. He always knew that his translation power was why his system boxes appeared in English, but he suddenly started wondering if the reason he couldn't read the descriptions was really that his power rank was too low. He'd always assumed his rank being low and the items being high was the cause, but now he had a sneaking new suspicion.

Perhaps the reason it didn't translate was that the descriptions were in the strange, alien text. Was it the language of the great astral beings? Could he read the Builder-derived items because the Builder wasn't a native great astral being but an ascended mortal?

"Bloody hell," Jason muttered as he closed his inventory. He hated that these were the kinds of questions he was asking himself, and was back to dreading Dawn giving him the answers.