

Chapter 685

Stray Thought

Jason floated up, his cloak shaped into gently beating wings as they carried him into Gordon's ritual diagram. His eyes swept over the sophisticated magical orrery, his body tingling as he passed through the glowing lines. He moved to the centre of the large, central sphere. He had the unnerving impression of being inside a complex machine, the operation of which he didn't completely understand. But he did have a basic grasp of how it worked, enough that he could take his place as the final component of the ritual.

Gordon's ritual magic was foundationally different to what Jason had been taught. The same was true of every ritualist on Pallimustus and Earth. Neither Dawn nor Shade had been willing to explain it to him, both transparently feigning ignorance. He, in turn, declined to tell them something that neither seemed to have realised: Gordon's ability to use that ritual magic was somehow bound to Jason.

Gordon had become even more linked to Jason than an ordinary familiar. It was when he did so that Gordon unsealed the ability to use the strange ritual magic. Their link gave Jason some instinctive insight into how it worked, but nowhere near enough to attempt using it himself. It wasn't knowledge but an instinctive feel, similar to what he had for astral forces.

Jason was not entirely without knowledge, however. He had spent a year roaming around Earth, using the Builder's magic door to access the fundamental underpinnings of reality. He had been crudely repairing the link between worlds, working with trial and error, without any theoretical framework. In that time, he had slowly and fumblingly obtained some understanding of the fundamental mechanisms of reality, and in Gordon's magic, he recognised the framework that he had lacked. By his own admission, his comprehension was that of a monkey attempting to do maths, but at least he could make the attempt. Also, he loved bananas.

It would take years of study that Jason wasn't even sure how to do before he would gain any real comprehension of the alien ritual magic. But all he needed today was the means to trigger Gordon's ritual, and for that, he knew enough. Just. He was pretty sure. Worst comes to worst, he could ask Gordon for a hint.

This was only the second time that Gordon had used this kind of ritual magic. The first had been when Jason had flooded himself with reality core energy that needed to be bled off. Gordon had used an aura projection ritual that drained the power out of the very

unconscious Jason to fuel itself, blasting his aura across Rimaros. That ritual had been inefficient by design, so as to drain the excess power killing Jason.

This new ritual was the same basic concept, a significantly more sophisticated refinement of the original. Along with being orders of magnitude more efficient, it did not replicate the same aura projection that ordinary ritual magic could accomplish. It was designed to draw out and project Jason's aura far more comprehensively. More than simple aura amplification, it would dig out every element of Jason's soul and put it on display, impressing exactly who and what he was on everyone within range. And that range would be enormous.

This time, Jason was an active participant. Floating in the air, he nervously opened and closed his fists. He thought back to his early days on Pallimustus, desperately trying to hide the vulnerability he felt. Confidence was something with which he had taken a hard 'fake it until you make it' approach. He had hidden his fear and confusion by making everyone else fearful and confused, veering manically between movie monster impressions and babbling nonsense.

Somewhere along the way, the version of himself that was cranked up to eleven had stopped being a mask. As he prepared to become more vulnerable than he ever had, it was time to find out if he had the resolve; if he'd finally made it or, deep down, he was still just faking it. This would, quite literally, announce himself to the world. No hiding behind bad manners, movie monster impressions or thirty-year-old television references. His soul would be on display for all to see, allies and enemies alike.

When Gordon had suggested this, Jason had recognised the value. Especially after his abject failure to get Gordon's butterflies up and running, this was the only way for Jason to make a substantive impact on the wider battle. Despite his self-assurances that he was happy just being one more adventurer, it never occurred to him *not* to do something outrageous and stupid to help sway the battle on a wider scale.

While Gordon's new ritual magic was unquestionably powerful, Jason could already see reasons it would never replace the ritual magic he already knew. Firstly, the complexity was absurd. Instead of relatively simple diagrams that could be drawn on a flat surface, these rituals were three-dimensional structures. Without a power like Clive's to draw them in the air, anyone using them would need to assemble actual sculptures.

The real killer, though, was in how the rituals were powered. Ordinary rituals drew on ambient magic, meaning that all most rituals needed was to not be in a magical dead zone. Gordon's rituals required a different source. That had been the reality core energy inside Jason for Gordon's first ritual, but he was definitely not trying that again. He didn't

need that level of power anyway, as this new ritual was far more efficient. This time he was going to do something that Dawn had explicitly told him not to: tap into his astral gate.

The astral gate inside his soul was, along with the astral throne, one of the things that fundamentally changed Jason's nature. They were the tools of astral kings, who forged their very souls into physical universes, creating domains where their power was unassailable and all-but-unlimited.

Dawn had told him that he should experiment with the astral throne, which governed physical aspects, while leaving the astral gate alone. It tapped into the deep astral, the infinite plane of raw magic and dimensional forces that Jason was far from ready to handle. After his first time tapping into it had left him convalescing for months, she had advised him to leave it be until he had ranked up. Preferably, all the way to diamond. That it had taken him months after she left before he completely ignored her warning was something of a personal triumph.

She hadn't been wrong, and he knew it. The astral space was the sea on which every universe in the cosmos sailed. What would opening the gate to that infinite power do?

"Explode me like an overfilled water balloon, probably."

"Mr Asano, you're talking to yourself again," Shade said as he emerged from Jason's cloak to float next to him.

"I know," Jason said. "I'm a little distracted trying to use a giant alien magic ritual. Which looks awesome, thank you, Gordon."

"The looks are not the point, Mr Asano," Shade said.

Jason turned his gaze from the glowing ritual sphere to give Shade a flat look. Despite being a blank-faced shadow with just enough softly glowing white to imply a butler's tuxedo, Shade managed to look embarrassed.

"Apologies, Mr Asano; I'm not quite sure what came over me."

"It's a big day," Jason told him. "Just don't let it happen again."

Jason relaxed some of his built-up tension at the banter with Shade, but strain and worry still marked his expression. Around them, the orrery clamoured for power like an insistent pet at meal time. This was his last chance to back out.

"What do you think, Shade? Do I tap into the astral gate and risk getting completely wrecking?"

"You know the price for what you are about to do, Mr Asano. You've paid it before. Channelling more power than you can handle has hurt you in the past, but I'm not telling you anything you don't know. It isn't the first time you've made this choice. You're just wasting time now when we both know that this isn't really a choice for you."

“It kind of is.”

“We don’t have the time for you to lie to me, Mr Asano, let alone yourself. I’ve seen you choose between the safety of others and the safety of yourself time and time again. Stop dithering and get to work.”

“Strict nanny,” Jason said with a chuckle. He sighed, nodded and closed his eyes as he pushed his senses into the orrery. This was not a simple amplification ritual that would passively affect his aura, and he had to feed his aura into it, like loading a cannon. It was a simple enough process, using the same fundamental aura control techniques that Farrah had taught him years earlier.

Jason was connecting with the ritual, which was far more reactive than an ordinary one. He was loading it with his aura, but that was the cannonball and it needed the gunpowder. The orrery was *hungry* and ambient mana was not what it needed. Jason reached into his soul, sending his will through his spiritual realm to where his astral gate rested. He understood its functions only a little more than he did Gordon's ritual magic, but he didn't need to. Today, all he had to do was open it.

Jason's spirit realm had been tapping into the infinite power of the deep astral since before it became a place that others could enter. It started as a trickle of power, replacing his need to feed himself spirit coins or magically rich food. Beyond that gentle, passive stream, drawing on the astral for any more power than that had not been an option. Then came the astral gate. A hole in the wall through which power trickled had now become a tap. And a tap could be opened.

He reached out with his will to open the astral gate the barest sliver. It was the tiniest gap he could manage, and yet a torrent of raw magic geysered into his soul. Like drinking from a fire hose, his senses were overwhelmed as all he could sense was the spray of it striking him like a weapon. Although the impact was spiritual, he almost fell from the sky in his disorientation, which would drop him out of the orrery and collapse the ritual.

He steeled his resolve, concentrating on shaping himself into a conduit, feeding power into Gordon's ravenous orrery. He immediately understood that if he didn't have that outlet, the magic would have ravaged him. Attempting to use the same method to fuel his essence abilities or ordinary rituals would probably kill him, with neither being designed for that kind of power.

Even with the outlet of the orrery, Jason struggled to remain conscious. The power pounded its way through his soul, and as his soul was his body, he felt it as a physical impact. He shook like an old pipe with too much water pressure, his eyes glowing bright like beacons.

The orrery also shone brighter and brighter. The sigils and lines of the central sphere blurred, melding together and hiding Jason's presence, transmuting into a heatless orange sun, stained with ominous swirls of dark blue. The spheres orbiting it also turned solid and took on the familiar nebulous eye shape of Gordon's orbs.

Jason's aura didn't blast out immediately, the orrery building up power like a charging battery. As the source of that charge, Jason floated within the sun, now inundated in blue and orange light. He clenched his fists, holding on as magic continued to explode through him. He maintained a tenuous grasp on lucidity, tapping into meditation techniques to maintain a grip on reality. Even so, his mind was scattered, odd thoughts popping in and out. He absently compared the sensations he was feeling to getting a colonic irrigation from a hurricane and started brainstorming business names for the service.

Jason was barely clinging to sanity by the time the orrery was fully powered. He closed the astral gate more from instinct than conscious command, drooping in the air as he felt like a cored apple. Then the orrery flared to life and Jason snapped back to alertness. He felt his soul pulse like a heartbeat, swelling with each thump.

The aura projection rituals Jason had experienced before were just that: projections. They cast in an image, compared to now where Jason felt like he was genuinely expanding, spreading out over the city. It reminded him of when he had formed his spiritual domains, taking over the transformation zones and remaking them in his image.

This was a declaration. Jason's soul was showing everyone exactly who and what it was. His aura flooded the city, even the areas where gold and diamond rankers held sway. He was not taking over the territory, but simply announcing himself. It was not the formation of a new spirit domain – yet, his mind added, and he scolded himself for the thought. He hoped Knowledge wouldn't tell Dominion about the stray thought.

There was a moment of stillness across the city as the fighting stopped. It was a fleeting instant, less than a second, and then the adventurers, messengers and monsters went back to thrashing one another. But in that instant, something had changed. The summoned monsters became erratic, their summoners struggling to keep them under control. As for the messengers, some became hesitant, but many more enraged, thrown into a berserker frenzy by what they had just sensed. Some attacked their opponents with renewed vigour, while others left their own battles to hunt down the source of the aura.

In any case, Jason had succeeded in his goal. Whether cowed or inflamed, the harmonic interlinking of messenger auras had been disrupted; not just in the entertainment district but across the city. The adventurer commanders didn't waste the opportunity, pushing themselves onto the front foot. The messenger auras weren't gone, but they were

no longer a unified front. As for the messengers themselves, they were not thinking tactically, which the better adventurers made the most of.

Unfortunately for the adventurers, their leaders had held their nerve. The gold-rankers were simply too strong to fall under Jason's influence and were screaming orders and dominating their silver-rank kin, pulling them into line before they gave away too much of an advantage.

In the entertainment district, the orrery faded away, dissolving into the air as Jason floated back to the ground. Jason landed, disoriented as he looked at his hands held out in front of him, the fingers flexing open and closed.

"How are you holding up?" Shade asked him. Jason turned with a confused expression before his eyes focused. He looked back at his hands.

"I'm fine," he said. "I mean, barely standing up, but I'm pretty sure that all I need is a good rest. I think I've finally hammered my own soul so much that it's gotten used to the abuse."

His expression creased into a scowl.

"That doesn't make me sound good."