

Chapter 565

A Significantly Different Paradigm

Jason's team all looked to him with grim expressions.

"Maybe we don't have to be so drastic," Neil suggested. "Instead of trying to portal all the way out, Jason opens one a couple of tunnels away and we leave nothing but an empty room for the enemy."

"Is that viable, Jason?" Humphrey asked.

"Maybe," he said. "If I force it. I can sense that the portal won't want to open."

"Won't want to?" Humphrey asked.

"You've got a teleport power," Jason said. "Have you used it, down here?"

"No," Humphrey said. He'd been ignoring the option because it was much less intrinsic to his power set than Jason's shadow teleport, which he suddenly realised he hadn't seen Jason use since they left the dock. Jason's shadow-blending, unpredictable movement and ability to hide his aura made his conventional stealth tactics almost seem like shadow jumping, but Humphrey hadn't seen him use the real thing.

Humphrey concentrated on his own teleport power, not using it but running his mana through the pathways that would. He felt resistance, like trying to push through the webs of a monstrous spider, complete with an instinctual sense of danger.

"It doesn't... feel safe," he said.

"That's because it's not," Clive said. "Anchor points are critical in any form of dimensional translocation, from turning intangible to teleportation and portals."

"As a naturally intangible entity," Shade said, "I can confirm that employing physical force in this place feels difficult."

"The deep granite here doesn't just impede magical senses and portals," Clive said. "It's much more sophisticated than that, but those are the most prominent practical effects. More important than how it affects the range of portals is the way it makes potential destinations unviable."

"That's true," Baseph said approaching from the group of gathered civilians. "Even very powerful essence users don't portal deeper than the docks, even when they could."

"That's because portal destinations need to be magically sound," Clive said. "The start point can be shakier because you're there in person and your essence ability will use your own senses to autonomically adapt, unless it's too unstable, in which case the portal won't work. That threshold is much lower with the destination, but you can force things, such as by pushing in more power. Consuming a spirit coin, for example."

“Let’s do that, then,” Neil said.

“No,” Clive said. “Portals normally won’t open to an unstable destination because portals are, by nature, very stable effects. Every instance of a portal mishap the Magic Society has on record is from someone using external aids, like a spirit coin, to open a portal in an unstable destination.”

“Isn’t that exactly the plan with this portal thing you and Jason have been working on?” Sophie asked.

“No,” Clive said. “Jason is talking about opening a portal beyond the reaches of this complex. The danger is to him. If he opens a portal to anywhere inside the complex, the danger is to every person who steps through it.”

“I don’t think we have a lot of time left to choose,” Neil said, pointing. The team turned to look at the door, which was starting to faintly glow with heat.

Jason looked to Humphrey, whose face creased with anger.

“What if I ate a diamond-rank coin?” Humphrey asked. “That might be enough strength to let me kill the people outside.”

“That wouldn’t most likely kill you,” Clive said. “It would definitely kill you. Jason has more soul strength and his essence abilities give him the ability to handle excess mana, which might – might – be enough that he doesn’t die if we work very, very hard. What that coin *would* most likely do is overload you with so much power that you’re crippled before you have a chance to face them. But I’m not telling you anything you don’t know.”

“Humphrey,” Jason said softly. “We don’t have time to clutch at any more straws than the one we’ve already got.”

Humphrey stormed away and lashed out with a kick that warped a metal table, wrenched it from the floor it was bolted to. It shot across the room, gouging the metal of the roof and a wall before thudding to the floor, no longer recognisable as furniture.

“That’s a yes,” Jason said and marched over to Melody, whipping her hood off and tossing it to Sophie. He yanked Melody to her feet, bringing them face to face. Jason had grown a little taller with rank-ups but was still not a large man and they were of roughly equal height.

“I told you that...” she said with a serpent’s smile before trailing off, unsettled by something in Jason’s alien eyes.

“There he is,” she said. “Nice to meet you, Mr Asano.”

“I’m going to open a portal,” he told her. “We can’t make you choose to go through, but you can choose to go.”

She looked at him with a curious expression.

“You can’t portal out of here. That’s impossible.”

“I’m going to do it anyway. Your choice is between going through the portal or us leaving your corpse behind when we do.”

“That, young master Geller,” she said, not taking her eyes from Jason, “is how to be intimidating. The resolve to follow through.”

Jason shoved Melody toward Sophie.

“Clive, prep the others,” he said.

As Jason once more made an archway out of cloud-stuff, Clive started briefing the others.

“Neil, Jason is going to be in a very bad way after he uses this power. His soul will be producing mana of a significantly greater concentration than his body can handle, like a tap that won’t shut off.”

“That will cause his body to break down,” Neil said. “That kind of damage is extremely resistant to healing.”

“Which is why you’ll need to do whatever you can for Jason. Baseph, we need this portal to be open for the smallest amount of time we can manage, so get your people organised into lines. They have to rush through as soon as it’s open. Shade, you already know what you and I have to do.”

“Yes,” Shade confirmed.

The cloud stuff archway Jason had formed shifted in colour from white to black, like ink spilling through milk. After it had turned entirely void black, blue and orange light started glowing from within. Jason held out one hand and the dark cloud-stuff solidified, turning into a marble-like substance. The archway remained empty, however, no portal opening.

With one hand still held out toward the archway, Jason used the other to take an item from his inventory. It looked like an ostrich egg made of gold, silver and blue transcendent light. To every aura sense in the room, it was a bottomless ocean of raw, unadulterated potential energy; power incarnate, like the clay from which the universe was moulded.

“What is that?” Melody asked in a half-whisper. The only answer she received was a sharp smack on the back of the head from her daughter.

A line of darkness, dancing like black fire, appeared at the base of the arch. The shadowy flamed turned silver and started rising to fill the arch until the opening was full of silver light. The light shifted slowly to a mix of gold and silver, flecked with blue. Then the gold turned orange as the silver turned back into black and the blue expanded. The final result was a dark void in the archway containing a blue and orange cloud nebula.

As that was happening, Jason started shining with transcendent light. This immediately alarmed his companions as it looked as if he'd managed to load himself down with his own devastating holy afflictions.

"Go," he said, his voice strained.

"Do you have a feel for how many people get through before it collapses?" Clive asked.

"GO!"

The single word Jason roared was less a human sound than the bellow of ship's horn, reverberating with an aura so powerful and unrestrained that some of the iron-rank civilians started screaming with terror fear and pain.

Clive braced his shoulders, glanced over the others and then went through. Sophie shoved her mother up to the portal.

"Choice time."

Melody didn't respond or hesitate moving straight through the portal. Sophie was only surprised for a moment before following her through.

Clive was used to the slight disorientation of portal travel, but what he experienced when emerging from Jason's special portal was on another level. He staggered away from the arch as Melody followed through, quickly followed by Sophie. Melody fell over while Sophie stood in place, swaying for a moment before grabbing Melody and dragging her out of the way.

Civilians started spilling through, stumbling and falling to the ground. With a grunt, Clive moved to pull them out of the way to make room for those that followed, Sophie doing the same. Many were violently ill, although any mess that splashed to the floor was neatly drained away into the dark cloud material that made it up.

They were in a large room in the cloud house that was actively changing around them. The white cloud-stuff was turning dark, plain black. The furniture in the room sank into the floor as the walls expanded outward. The ceiling pulled away, opening the room up to the sky.

Neil and Baseph came through in the middle of the civilians. Neil recovered quickly and started helping people, while Baseph took longer to recover before doing the same. The civilians weren't doing well, especially the low-rankers and the non-celestines, whose resistance to astral effects help inure them. An iron-rank elf and human went into seizures from the effects of the modified portal.

The aura beating down on them didn't help anyone, pulsing like the heartbeat of a giant beast. The cloud house was in no way hiding its nature as a spirit domain with an all-encompassing version of Jason's aura crushing down on everyone inside, tyrannical and utterly unyielding. The only grace was that it was not currently hostile, even to Melody who crawled into a corner, momentarily forgotten.

After the last of the civilians were through, Humphrey and Belinda came through, at an angle to fit through the arch as they supported Jason between them. They each had an arm slug under one of his, while the reality core rested lightly in his hands. Jason was incandescent with transcendent light, glowing brighter than the egg-shaped core he was holding.

Belinda and Humphrey staggered but powered on, carrying Jason forward. Clive jumped in front of Jason, who was almost too bright to look at, his head lolling, semi-conscious at best.

"Jason!" Clive yelled at him. "You can stop!"

Clive grabbed Jason's head between his hands.

"SHUT DOWN THE PORTAL!"

Jason looked at Clive with bleary, confused eyes and Clive yanked the reality core from Jason's hands, tossing it away. The transcendent light filling the portal sputtered out and the marble-like stone turned back into cloud-stuff, then was absorbed into the floor. Jason had barely been supporting himself at that point and he stopped trying, only Humphrey and Belinda holding him upright.

Jason regained his own feet, shrugging the pair off and holding out his hand, unsteady but determined. He opened a portal to his spirit realm, hoping it could siphon the excess energy from his body. He stumbled toward the archway, only for the power within his body to react violently. The archway collapsed and Jason was thrown violently back as a bright flash flared between them. The soft wall cushioned Jason's impact and Humphrey rushed to catch him before he fell.

Baseph and Sophie were already clearing the room, shoving civilians out a door. Neil was looking to the ones who had seizures.

"Look after the civilians," Clive said to Neil. "We have a short window before the mana starts eating Jason away, so use it to help them and then come back."

Neil nodded and crouched down over the pair having seizures.

"Help me get them out of the building," he said to Baseph. "This aura isn't doing them any favours."

"What is this place?" Baseph asked.

“Work today, questions tomorrow.”

Clive helped Humphrey and Belinda lay Jason carefully down in the middle of the room. Shade's bodies swept out of Jason's shadow in a crowd, surrounding him. The closest ones reached out to touch him while others touched them, expanding out like a spider's web as they started collectively draining mana out of Jason. Clive stood over Jason and also started draining his mana with a spell.

Ability: [Eldritch Imbalance] (Balance)

- Spell (drain, magic, channel).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None (channel).

- Current rank: Silver 3 (19%).

- Effect (iron): Drain mana from the target for as long as the spell is channelled. Level of drain scales higher based on the target's current mana relative to their maximum mana.

- Effect (bronze): While being channelled, periodically inflicts [Mana Imbalance] on enemies with less mana than the caster.

- Effect (silver): Gain an alternate version of the spell that is instantaneous instead of channelled and inflicts a small amount of withering damage instead of draining mana. This is an execute ability, but the damage escalation scales with low mana instead of low health.

- [Mana Imbalance] (affliction, magic, stacking): Mana drain abilities have an increased effect on the target. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

Normally, when Clive used his mana drain spell, the rank of the target was irrelevant. Whatever grade of mana came from them, the spell refined or, in the case of higher-rank targets, diluted it into mana appropriate to Clive's rank. When he drained mana from Jason it was like injecting lava and he screamed as the mana entered his body, breaking the channelling effect.

The stream of mana that had briefly passed from Jason to Clive had not been the usual blue but a bright silver-blue. The same mana was leaking from Jason on its own, passing through his skin like sweat, along with blood. Jason's white suit started dissolving in patches, the areas around the holes staining with blood. Clive noted that the cloud house appeared to be leeching the aggressive foreign mana from Jason. They had hoped it would when postulating ways to increase Jason's survivability but anything to do with his spirit domain was guesswork.

Clive glanced at the Shade bodies spread around Jason, who had formed some kind of circuit, draining mana from Jason and passing it through themselves like a network. Clive could actually see the mana pass through them like a bucket chain, being diluted as it spread amongst all the bodies. Steeling himself, Clive started channelling his spell again, gritting his teeth as Jason's enhanced mana passed into his body.

Humphrey, Sophie and Belinda were still evacuating civilians from the room. The higher-ranked bronze and the two silvers were the last of the civilians, left due to better enduring the tyrannical aura flooding the room. Sitting on the floor where he had sat to recover from passing through the portal, one of the silver-rankers spotted the glowing ostrich egg of the reality core. Thinking about his personal storage power, he looked around and saw everyone's attention on either Jason or the exit. He slowly and casually shuffled towards the reality core until a massive sword, shaped like a dragon wing was conjured in front of his face.

"Rethink that move, friend."

With the pervasive aura of the spirit domain, he hadn't noticed Humphrey's approach. He looked up and nodded eagerly.

"Time to go," Humphrey said coldly.

Getting up, the man followed Humphrey and the last of the other civilians out.

After quickly assessing that none of the civilians would die from the savage portal crossing, Neil dashed back into the cloud house. The outside he left to Taika, Travis and Gary who had been in the cloud house when the team portalled in. They had come running with the changes to the house and been immediately tasked by Humphrey with civilian-wrangling.

Even the exterior of the cloud house had transformed into the same black cloud stuff, the ordinary building façade completely gone. The house was going through changes that Neil was fairly sure were larger than they should be without the house being returned to the flask for redeployment. He ignored the errant thought as he raced back inside.

Reaching what was now a large open platform at the top of the house, he moved through the swarm of Shades crowding Jason. Sparks zapped him as he passed through, like pumped-up static electricity. The Shades were turning the wrong colour, a silver-blue starting to stain their normal uniform black.

Neil found Clive draining bright blue mana from Jason in a stream as thick as one of Humphrey's thighs. Jason was still glowing bright but the light dimmed slightly every so

often, as if the mana inside him were breathing. Neil crouched down next to where Jason lay.

Aside from the blood and mana seeping through his skin, Jason looked fairly intact, if delirious. His head moved from side to side as if he were confused and looking for something, but his eyes were closed, although light shone through the eyelids. Neil's perception ability, Eyes of Opportunity, allowed him to see the vulnerabilities of people. Because of this, he understood that Jason was in a far more fragile state than he appeared.

The underlying framework of any entity existing in physical reality was its magical matrix. This was true even for intangible entities like Shade, with no physical body. Neil could see that the overcharged mana Jason's soul was dumping into the magical matrix of his body was breaking it down on a fundamental level. If not for Jason's formidable soul strength regulating the release of mana at least a little, his magical matrix would have broken down already.

Unfortunately, there was little Neil could do about Jason's condition. Repairing the body as it started to break down would marginally delay the collapse of the magical matrix by maintaining the platform in which it resided, but the impact would be limited. Neil immediately saw that Shade and Clive pulling the mana from Jason was far more effective than anything Neil could do.

Instead, he turned his attention to Shade and Clive. The mana they were both taking in was likewise negatively impacting them, although not so drastically as the power that left Jason helpless on the floor. Shade appeared to be spreading the mana across his bodies to minimise the degradation of his magical matrix and was, for the moment, alright. Clive, on the other hand, was building up dangerous levels of the caustic mana.

An unexpected effect of Clive's drain spell was how quickly it pulled mana from Jason. The strength of the drain effect was predicated on how much of their maximum mana pool the target currently had filled. Jason was stuffed with well beyond his baseline limit and almost certainly would be dead if his own powers didn't allow him to do something similar. As a result of this mana level, Clive was pulling more mana out of Jason than he thought the spell was even capable of. Clive's maximum mana pool was far greater than an average essence user of his rank, but he quickly found himself with a full tank.

Clive stopped channelling the mana drain spell and started collecting the massive power currently burning his insides. He raised his hand to the sky, tilting his head back as he gathered the mana searing through him in preparation for launching another spell.

Neil recognised what Clive was about to do.

“Want a boost?”

“No,” Clive said. “I need to spend the mana.”

“Right,” Neil said, nodding. His bolster spell would up the power and reduce the cost of an ally’s ability. What Clive needed now was to purge all the mana he could.

Clive’s Wrath of the Magister spell was the most powerful instantaneous damage spell the team has access to. It was also the most mana-hungry by far, becoming more powerful the more mana Clive pumped into it. As the mana poured out of him and he chanted the incantation, he silently promised never to complain about the spell’s mana-devouring nature again.

“Feel the power of reality remade.”

Clive had never unleashed such a powerful variant of the spell before. Not only was it the most mana he had ever pumped into it but that mana was supercharged. The result was a rainbow sky beam that quickly grew to almost the width of the room as it shot into the sky.

After a brief, staggered moment, Clive went back to draining mana.

Neil tossed a healing bolt at Clive, the green energy helping Clive’s body from the strain of the mana coursing through it. It would have been water off a duck’s back to Jason, but Clive wasn’t in such a drastic state, so Neil dedicated his efforts where they were of actual use.

“How’s he doing?” Clive asked as he drained mana.

“Not good,” Neil said bitterly. “There’s only one thing I can do for him, but I need to hold off as long as I can or it might kill him.”

“What’s that?” Clive asked.

“My Hero’s Moment spell,” Neil told him.

“That’s good thinking,” Clive said. “It offers a big boost to maximum mana that will really help him.”

They both understood the ability, so neither gave voice to the danger. Once the spell ended, the subject’s maximum mana was temporarily reduced to below its starting value. If Jason was still being flooded with overcharged mana at that point, it would definitely kill him.

“Last minute,” Clive said.

“Yeah,” Neil said grimly.

Humphrey, Sophie and Belinda watched as Clive, Neil and Shade worked to save Jason. An hour after their arrival, they were still desperately struggling to keep Jason alive. Between Jason's spirit domain leeching mana out of him and Clive and Shade doing the same, the light shining inside Jason was noticeably subdued, but it was not diminishing as swiftly as it needed to. The degradation of Jason's body's magical matrix was starting to show and he now looked like he was in the final stages of starvation. Neil healed him as best he could, but it was rubbing ointment on the burns of a man still on fire.

Clive was strained but by purging his mana each time his big spell came off cooldown he was in a stable loop of draining Jason and disposing of the mana without overtaxing his own body too badly.

Shade was a different story. While his array of bodies gave him a higher overall mana capacity than Clive, he had no effective purging mechanism. The first time it reached a critical point, mana flowed from all the bodies to collect in one at the edges of the web, close to the door. It dashed out of the room and, moments later, an explosion rocked the cloud house.

Expending the body hadn't been enough to completely clear out the mana from the others, but it had bought time and there were more bodies to spare. However, with each body that he dumped mana into and sent off to detonate, Shade's overall mana capacity dropped.

Neil had tried bringing Jason to his senses. If Jason had been conscious he could possibly have used the mana collecting inside him to replenish Shade's bodies, which would both help Shade's efforts and serve as a useful mana sump. Unfortunately, none of Neil's techniques had managed to rouse him and he feared that pushing harder would just make things worse.

"I feel so useless," he lamented. Clive said nothing, only glancing at the rest of the team, standing helpless at the edge of the room.

"I know," Neil growled. "But I'm the healer. Keeping everyone alive is the first thing I have to do. The first."

He examined Jason's body again, seeing that it was a wreck. It no longer had the physical integrity of a silver-ranker and barely that of a bronze.

"Neil," Shade said, grabbing Neil's attention. Shade never used his first name.

"Something is about to happen," Shade told him. "Gordon is going to need your assistance."

"How so?"

“You will need to point out the worst-affected parts of Mr Asano’s body. Only you can see the underlying pattern.”

“What then?” Neil asked.

“Then you will need to refrain from intervening, regardless of what happens,” Shade said. “This is true for everyone in this room.”

Sophie looked over at her mother in the corner, then went over, hood in hand.

“Let me see,” Melody asked, her face holding an uncharacteristic sincerity. Sophie didn’t buy it.

“If you find a way to interfere,” Sophie told her, “you are going to live a very long time.”

Sophie pulled the hood over her mother’s head.

Gordon manifested in the air above Jason.

“The most damaged parts of his body, Mr Davone,” Shade said to Neil.

“The extremities,” Neil said. “Any of them. Anything from the knees and elbows down is close to ruined, and the upper limbs aren’t much better.”

None of Jason’s body looked healthy as he became more and more withered and skeletal. To Neil’s eyes, however, it was even worse. Fundamental damage to the magical matrix of a body could be repaired so long as the soul was intact and the body was alive. It was an intensive and laborious process, however. Compared to the ease with which magic could mend flesh and bones it was an excruciating slog for healer and healed alike.

Jason’s companions watched his familiar float above him, surrounded by six orbiting eyes. The team all jumped when beams shot from the orbs and started cutting through Jason’s weakened flesh. Humphrey and Sophie took a step forward and Neil started, still crouched next to Jason. Clive was startled enough that it interrupted his channelling spell.

All four were startled again as they heard Shade’s voice raised to a shout.

“DO NOT INTERVENE!”

Gordon cut away Jason’s limbs just below the shoulder and hips, his force beams easily disintegrating the weakened flesh and bone. Blood did not spill from the cut stumps. Instead, leeches swarmed out, tightly packing themselves into the form of new limbs, melting together into new, healthy flesh.

The dismembered parts of Jason’s body broke down to goo within moments of being severed, dissolving into rainbow smoke. Neil looked once more at Jason’s body matrix and saw the newly-grown limbs had actually restored Jason’s matrix in those areas, making Neil wonder how that was even possible, his mind racing.

“What’s happening?” Humphrey asked, his voice heavy with threat.

“Oh, damn,” Neil said as realisation struck. “Jason’s leech familiar is connected to him on a deep soul level,” Neil said. “Unlike external magic from any healer – or even most of Jason’s own abilities – Colin can replace not just the flesh but the underlying magical matrix. Only when he’s replacing wholesale, though, not through the normal regeneration. But it means that Colin can restore Jason in ways that healing magic can’t. Very few abilities can heal on that level, and they’re almost always self-healing, like your Immortality power, Humphrey. The only external things I know of that do it are miracle potions and very high-rank healing powers. The powers that don’t resurrect anymore can now heal on a body-matrix level instead. It’s what the Healer gave them to compensate for what Death took away.”

Neil was interrupted by another Shade body leaving to rock the room with an explosion. With half of the bodies gone, the rate at which they were being expended was accelerating.

“Does this mean Colin can keep Jason alive until we’re done?” Sophie asked.

“No,” Neil said, looking over Jason’s body again. “Gordon, don’t cut off anything but his limbs. I know he’s a tough bastard, but he isn’t at his best right now. If you start digging into his torso, it’ll probably kill him before Colin can replace the flesh.”

“Meaning?” Humphrey asked.

“Colin buys us time because the extremities degrade faster than the central mass, but it’s still an uncertainty. Clive, you can start draining again.”

Clive mana drain was harsher than Shade’s and he had held off while Colin was regrowing the limbs. He nodded and cast his mana drain spell.

“The problem is the head,” Neil said. “Normally that wouldn’t be so bad because Jason’s body hasn’t had a brain for a while. It figures that he’s unconscious for such a prime joke opportunity. Jason’s head is degrading faster than his torso, but he’s fragile enough that cutting it off and growing it would kill him.”

“Wouldn’t that kill him anyway?” Clive asked.

“Of all of us, Jason could probably take it because of Colin. The rest of us would need some very good, very powerful and very quick healing magic.”

Another Shade body left, rocking the room with the now-familiar explosion.

“My ability to continue draining Mr Asano is swiftly reaching its limit,” Shade said. He only had three bodies remaining, all of which were almost entirely blue-white instead of black. Two of them dimmed but only slightly as the third turned blue and rushed away.

The rest of the team now had room to crowd around Jason. They looked on seeing the glow inside him had dimmed considerably. Neil, who saw deeper, shook his head.

"It's too soon," he said. "If I use my spell on Jason now, it won't last long enough."

Clive stooped to cast another sky beam.

"Options?" he asked, after resuming his drain spell. "I'm all out."

Neil tossed another life bolt into Clive's overworked body.

"Me too," he said.

"Colin is at his limit of regenerating Mr Asano," Clive said. "His biomass is almost entirely expended."

Neil examined Jason's body yet again, seeing that if he waited any longer, the spell would probably kill Jason itself.

"If it wakes him up," Neil said, "It might let him burn off some mana remaking Shade bodies."

First, Neil used his Bolster ability to enhance the next power he used. He followed that up by chanting the incantation for Hero's Moment.

"Now is the moment to seize the reins of fate."

The team felt Neil's magic infuse Jason's body. It had numerous effects to enhance him, but it was the expanded mana capacity that would hopefully keep him alive. The time it took for the mana flowing from his soul at a slowly decreasing rate to reach the new limit gave Jason's body a reprieve and they saw him relax. Unfortunately, he did not awake.

"Neil, could you try forcing him awake again?" Clive asked.

"No," Neil said. "It'd kill him."

"Then what do we do?" Sophie asked.

"We hope the spell lasts long enough," Neil said, knowing that it wouldn't.

Gordon had retreated back into Jason after amputating Jason's limbs, but he appeared once more, this time floating around, moving back and forth in front of the team.

"He wants us to back off," Shade said. "All of us."

"I can't stop draining."

"It's not enough, Clive," Neil said as he stood up. "If Gordon has any idea at all, we have to go with it; it doesn't really matter what it is. Something is better than nothing, and I've got nothing. How about you?"

Neil and Clive shared a look and Clive stopped channelling his spell. They backed away with the rest of the team, including the two remaining Shade bodies.

"What is Gordon doing?" Humphrey asked.

"I genuinely have no idea," Shade said.

They all watched Gordon, hovering motionless over Jason. After a moment, he slowly floated upward as the eye orbs started rotating around him at a rapidly increasing pace. Suddenly all six started blasting out beams in staccato bursts, not at Jason but around him. Where the beams struck the floor of the cloud platform on which they stood, they left behind lines and sigils of blue and orange light.

"It's like your ability, Clive," Humphrey said. "He's drawing a ritual diagram."

"Did you know he could do that?" Clive asked Shade.

"I did not, Mr Standish."

"What's he trying to do?" Neil asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Clive said, peering at the diagram.

"It's really not," Neil said.

"Definitely not," Sophie agreed.

"That was an absurd thing to say," Humphrey said.

They looked on as Gordon worked, lapsing into silence. Belinda worriedly nestled up against Humphrey and he gently stroked her hair. Sophie gave them a brief side-glance but said nothing. Gordon's eyes all fired simultaneously, with absolute speed and precision.

"I think it's some kind of aura projection ritual," Clive said. "It's working off principles I've never seen, though. It's a significantly different paradigm to the..."

He trailed off as Gordon stopped working, but nothing happened. Then Gordon vanished, disappearing into Jason's aura again.

"Is that it?" Neil asked.

"Is Clive meant to conduct the ritual?" Sophie asked.

"I can't," Clive said. "I don't understand it enough."

They didn't move closer, wary of stepping into the intricate ritual circle that occupied the bulk of the room with glowing lines and sigils of blue and orange. As they looked on, unsure of what to do next, an eye orb appeared above Jason.

When Gordon was not manifested, Jason could use up to two of his orbs. A second one appeared over Jason, then a third, fourth, fifth and sixth in increasingly rapid succession. They started circling over Jason and the overcharged mana started seeping from his body to be absorbed by the orbs. The whole team's gaze was locked on them as they absorbed more and more mana. Each time they did, different sections of the glowing ritual circle started glowing brighter.

"Did you know he could do that?" Clive asked Shade again.

"I did not, Mr Standish."

“You should maybe have a little talk with your fellow familiar,” Clive said.

“He’s not traditionally talkative.”

As more and more of the ritual circle lit up, the enormous nebula eye that Jason’s spirit domain could call up manifested over the platform.

“Jason said that was some kind of defensive weapon, right?” Neil asked. “Maybe it’s going to burn off the mana with some kind of death beam.”

Clive tilted his head back and forth, his face conflicted. He stopped as he made up his mind.

“Neil, boost me,” he said.

“Are you sure?” Neil asked.

“I’m sure.”

“You said you don’t know what that ritual is.”

“Doesn't matter. As you said, it's something and we've got nothing, so let's push it all the way.”

“What are you talking about?” Humphrey asked.

“Doing something that’s probably stupid,” Clive said, “but it’s that kind of day. Jason would do it.”

“Which is how we got here!” Humphrey exclaimed.

“Do it,” Sophie said.

Neil used Bolster on Clive to boost his next power. Clive held his arms out in front of him and his life force started emerging from his body, shrouding him in a vibrant red glow, streaked with silver-blue. With a pushing motion using both hands, a stream of life force moved like a smoke trail, out of Clive and into the ritual.

Ability: [Blood Magic] (Balance)

- Special ability (sacrifice).
- Cost: Variable health.
- Cooldown: None (channel).

- Current rank: Silver 4 (02%).

- Effect (iron): Consume your own life force to gain mana.

- Effect (bronze): Expend your life force to enhance the power of rituals and essence abilities employing rituals. Amount of life force required varies by ritual. Utilising life force other than your own for this effect leaves a mark on your soul that can be detected with sufficiently rigorous examination.

- Effect (silver): Expend your own life force to enhance the effect of spells.

As soon as the trail of life force came into contact with the ritual circle, the trail grew thicker and the ritual drank it in, absorbing more life force. It especially devoured the silver and blue streaks coursing through Clive's life force, which brought him some relief. It was the overcharged mana Clive hadn't purged and he was happy to lose it. A lot of life force went with it, though, causing Clive to stagger heavily.

"Cut it off if it needs more than you've got," Neil warned him as life force continued to drain out. Neil used a life Bolt to replenish Clive's dwindling life force.

"Obviously."

The eye orbs continued absorbing mana from Jason and life force from Clive, Neil healing Clive regularly to compensate. Finally, every part of the ritual diagram was shining more brightly than it had when Gordon drew it. The orbs then moved to various points around the ritual circle, sinking into the floor. In the air above them, the great eye started to grow and change.

It was hard to see what was happening from directly underneath. The eye rapidly became a field of shadows, through which dark shapes moved like fish in a pond. It was vast, at least a kilometre across and just as high. In the centre of the field, an empty, hooded cloak appeared, darker than the shadows around it but limned with light and speckled with stars. Inside the cloak was a bright sky, like the one the field had displaced.

The aura of Jason's spirit domain rushed out like a tsunami.

The Rimaros royal palace was on a sky island floating above Livaros, one hundred and twenty kilometres away from Jason's cloud house on Arnote. Soramir Rimaros was being briefed by Trenchant Moore on the latest information coming from the mining complex rescue operation when he turned his head in the exact direction of Arnote, his eyes going wide.

"What the fuck?"

Trenchant Moore dropped his clipboard.