

Chapter 583

Flavours of Authority

Jason and Farrah were standing at the balustrade of a balcony, looking out over the water as the sky grew dark.

“You know there’s going to be an inquisition waiting for you when you leave this cloud house,” she said. “Probably the most polite inquisition ever held, but some very powerful people will have some very pressing questions.”

“I know. Dawn has gone off to lay some groundwork but they’ve already been knocking at my door. I’ve been leaving Shade to deal with them. He knows a lot of very polite ways to tell people to sod off.”

“You can’t ignore them forever.”

“No kidding. He’s been seeing off reps from the Adventure Society, Magic Society and a hundred other organisations that I’ve never heard of. All the aristocratic families that Vesper wanted to play me off of are suddenly very interested in meeting me. The royal family, of course. I imagine Liara will come along in person, sooner or later. Maybe Soramir, but I think he’s wary of setting foot in here.”

“What are you going to tell them?”

“That I was a sidekick and they should ask Dawn.”

“That’s a lie. And they’ll know it’s a lie.”

“But they won’t say it’s a lie because the reason they know it’s a lie is that they were all spying on me. That’s how politics works.”

“Dawn has seemed a bit... I don’t know. Extra relaxed, maybe, despite everything going on. What did you two get up to exactly while the rest of us were off doing monster surge things?”

“Dawn will be leaving us soon,” Jason said, dodging the question. “I think she’s indulging herself before she goes. Having some fun before it’s back to stodgy cosmic accounting or whatever.”

“Cosmic accounting?”

“I was never really clear on what she does. I get the impression it’s dealing with a lot of stoic dignity-of-the-immortal types.”

“You know it’s madness out there. I was at the Magic Society with Travis when everything went crazy. We had gold-rankers trying to drag us off to answer questions about you. If Trenchant Moore hadn’t shown up to get us out, it might have gotten a little rough.”

Trenchant Moore was a gold-ranker that served the Rimaros royal family and was currently serving as aide to Soramir Rimaros.

“Did he take you to Soramir?”

“No, he brought us straight here. I got the impression that whatever you did, Soramir wants you to feel some goodwill.”

“His observers were paying attention, then. No surprise there.”

“Is the Builder really just packing up because you gave him a brick?”

“It was more of a tablet. I suspect it’s great astral being politics driving these events. Like most of the nonsense I’m neck-deep in, it isn’t about me. I just happen to be the poor sap caught up in the games of these theme-park Cthulhu monsters. A mortal like me having stumbled into a scrap of their power is just one more point for them to play off.”

“But you had the power ever since you absorbed that magic door. Why is it an issue now?”

“Because of the nature of the power. I’ve been playing around with this power for a while without really understanding it. But having the raw, unrefined stuff in my hands has given me a much better understanding of what I’ve been dealing with.”

“This power being authority.”

“Yes. Authority is the fundamental power of the cosmos and it comes in two flavours; two states in which it can operate. One state is set. The power has been put to a purpose, making it fixed and defined. Safe. Clay turned into a bowl. My spirit domains are comprised of this set-state authority. Everything in physical reality is underpinned by authority to some degree. What the Builder’s door allowed me to do was enter a dimensional layer where I could access and manipulate that underpinning of authority. I didn’t understand what I was doing at the time, but it was the same when I was manipulating those transformation zones. I was manipulating authority to plug holes in the universe. The result was my spirit domains.”

“If your spirit domains are made of authority, doesn’t that mean you’ve had authority in your possession ever since you established them?”

“Longer than that, even. My spirit domains are areas of influence in physical reality. But my spirit realm – my soul space – is also an aspect of authority. My authority. When I accepted that power and I changed, I became an entity capable of using - and even partially comprised of - authority. That’s how I can manipulate a transformation zone. They were essentially areas where the set-state authority underpinning the region broke down.”

“Like the Builder’s door when you flooded yourself with magic.”

“Quite similar, yes, but on a much larger scale. I needed to go in and return the authority to its set state. I was running on instinct, though, and had no idea how to turn it back the way it was. All I could do was put it back together as best I could.”

“And the result was a spirit domain.”

“Exactly.”

“But that means the reason you have authority at all is because of that power the great astral beings gave you.”

“That’s right. I only accepted that ability because I needed it to find you. It’s a grab bag of weird effects; completely unlike my other outworlder powers. I know where all those abilities come from, now. Why it changed my body and soul so profoundly, and why it helped me manipulate transformation zones.”

“Then why are the great astral beings suddenly up in arms about you having authority, since they’re the ones that gave you access in the first place?”

“I knew from the start that the ability wasn’t designed for me. It was designed to look like it was, but it was always meant to make me able to do what the World-Phoenix needed me to. But I was only ever meant to have set-state authority, the first flavour I mentioned. The other state of authority is potential-state. If set-state authority is a clay bowl, potential-state authority is the unworked clay. Except the clay is actually enriched uranium.”

“That’s not good.”

“Correct. Potential-state authority is the dangerous stuff. The wield-the-power-of-the-gods stuff. Much of my understanding of authority comes from just holding potential-state authority in my hands.”

“And that’s the stuff you aren’t meant to have.”

“Think of it like this: authority with a set state is like a treehouse, and silver-ranker like me is like a child.”

“I can imagine that. Very easily.”

Jason shot her a flat look before continuing.

“Even if I, the child, strictly speaking, shouldn’t have the treehouse, the great astral beings are willing to leave it be because I can’t do a lot of damage. At worst, I might hurt myself.”

“Okay.”

“Potential-state authority is like the tools and materials you need to build a treehouse. Planks, nails, hammer, saw, power drill. Stuff that you don’t want a child to be playing with because they’ll hurt themselves very badly and do a lot of damage in the process.”

“And you don’t think that treating you like a child is high-handed?”

“Not in this case,” Jason said firmly. “I felt that power and it’s not something I should have. How powerful a magic item is a cloud flask.”

“Extremely. It’s one of the most complex and robust items I’ve ever heard of.”

“I got angry for just a moment and I remade the cloud flask, just like that. Changed it on a fundamental level and I don’t even understand how. When a person has that kind of power in their hands, they could do terrible, unbelievable things. It’s intoxicating to feel like a god, but I’m not a god and I don’t want to be. I felt the damage I could do and I’ve made mistakes before. Messing up with that kind of power... it shouldn’t be in my hands. I don’t like that it’s in anyone’s, because even the great astral beings are a little too like the gods of Olympus for my taste.”

“The gods of Olympus?”

“Petty, jealous, vain. The power of infinity but the flaws of a mortal.”

“I don’t think they’re that bad.”

“They don’t have to be that bad. When their power is that great, everything they do is magnified. Bad becomes catastrophic through escalation of scale. And I’m certainly not better than them. You’ve seen my mistakes and failures. What they’ve cost. I don’t want that magnified and I shouldn’t have that power. Even if I was willing to keep it, I’m not built to contain the volatility of potential-state authority. If my body and soul hadn’t been reformed to specifically endure those forces, it would have killed me in minutes. I’m well rid of it.”

“This authority is the core of everything, isn’t it? The link between worlds, the transformation zones. Everything we were fighting for on Earth.”

“Yes. The original Builder conducted an experiment with this universe and the one I’m from, centred on Earth. He rigged it so that a planet would form, but instead of using original designs, he Frankensteined old ones to see what would happen. Then he gets the boot for playing silly buggers and the World-Phoenix intervened to stop things from going awry.”

“And we get the new Builder.”

“Yep. Then, thirteen billion years later, we have Earth and Pallimustus. The same starting point, but one in a magic-rich universe and one in a magic-poor universe. Pallimustus has gods, and one of them makes a deal with the new Builder. The god recruits an outworlder, originally from Earth, and sends them back to Earth to mess with it. The Builder provides a door that allows them to fiddle with the authority governing Earth

and, critically, the link between Earth and Pallimustus. Someone gave a kid the tools to modify the treehouse and he weakened the supports.”

“Pallimustus gets primed for invasion and Earth gets escalating magic that destabilises it.”

“Yep. But the Builder knows the other great astral beings will jump on him if he just lets his predecessor’s experiment blow up, especially since he interfered with the World-Phoenix’s correction measures to do so.”

“Which is why he left the door that was originally used to create the problem. That way, the damage can be fixed once the Builder has gotten what he needs from Earth. Enter you, inevitably sending his plans awry.”

“Not that awry. He still got to invade this world.”

“But you stopped the transformation zones.”

“Yeah. They were areas of set-state authority breaking down into potential-state authority. The domes were the world sealing them away, like scabs over a wound. But like scabs, there can be some nasty stuff under there. Mostly they healed up, left some scars but the world carried on. But some wouldn’t heal, because there was an astral space in there, agitating them as well.”

“That’s why Dawn called them dimensional ulcers.”

“Yes. That was when I had to step in and use the power World-Phoenix gave me and the Builder’s door. Without them, I wouldn’t have been able to do anything. But because I did, I was able to treat those ulcers. I didn’t realise what I was doing though, and created spirit domains in the process. I changed the world and I changed myself.”

“But this wasn’t the authority you, get in trouble for.”

“No, my domains are set-state authority. Safe. Turning the authority from potential-state to set-state was the whole point. Now it’s the treehouse that I’m allowed to play in.”

“But that authority can turn back, right? Isn’t that what happened to the Builder’s door when you accidentally trashed it for parts?”

“More or less.”

“Wouldn’t that mean that if your spirit domains were broken down in the same way, you’d get more of this potential-state authority?”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure if that happened to my domains, it would kill me.”

“What happens to the authority if you die?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’d get sanctioned, whatever that is. Or maybe I’d become an astral being, anchored to my spirit domains like a ghost.”

“Can’t Dawn tell you?”

“Even those on Dawn’s level have a limited understanding of how authority works. Shako got punted across the ocean because he didn’t know all the rules. It’s why she actually gets nervous about some of the things I’ve been doing. She did not like me having any potential-state authority.”

“But you did use some of that potential-state authority, right?”

“Only a little, by accident. I infused it into my cloud flask when I got angry.”

“Which did what?”

Jason shared a system window for Farrah to see through his party interface power.

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- [Cloud Flask] has been converted to an authority artefact.
 - [Cloud Flask] is a growth item. Maximum potential rank has been increased to [Transcendent].
 - [Cloud Flask] has been linked to your permanent spirit domains. Your spirit domains may use properties of the [Cloud Flask] within their areas of influence.
 - Your ability to influence the fundamental rules of reality within temporary spirit domains created through the [Cloud Flask] is increased, matching your ability to do so in permanent spirit domains.
 - [Incomplete Portal Gate] has been repurposed and completed.
 - The [Cloud Flask] can be used to open a gate from your spirit domains to your spirit realm. There are no restrictions on who can use this portal to access your spirit realm.
 - Those on the threshold of your spirit realm will sense the power you will hold over them there before entering.
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“The trust restriction on entering your spirit realm is gone,” Farrah said.

“Not entirely. If I open the portal myself, the restriction is still in place. If I use the cloud flask to create one, the restriction is gone. It latched onto what Clive and I were trying to do, using the cloud flask to enhance my portal ability, and used it to make a gate into my spirit realm.”

“You should still be careful about who you let in,” Farrah warned. “That place will terrify anyone who didn’t trust you enough to get in already. Scared people make bad choices.”

“I know that better than most.”

“What was that part about influencing the physical reality within your spirit domain?”

“I think it means that I can change things the way I can within the soul space of my spirit realm.”

“It implies that you could do that even before you shoved authority into it.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “There were a lot of changes after I almost killed myself portalling everyone out of that mine. I could never test them, though, because I’m still wrecked.”

He shared another system window.

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- You have forcibly unsealed the restricted effect of the title [Reality Hegemon].

Title: [Reality Hegemon]

- The maximum total size of your spirit domains is increased.
- The effect of your spirit domain on hostile intruders ignores rank disparity.
- You may influence the state of physical reality within the influence of your spirit domain. You do not meet the rank requirements to utilise this effect. **THIS EFFECT HAS BEEN FORCIBLY UNSEALED.** You may not utilise this ability across dimensional boundaries. Utilising this ability will inflict a backlash commensurate to the change enacted.

“Basically, I can remake the world, within the scope of my spirit domains. It used to say only my permanent spirit domains, but that’s gone now.”

“Remake how?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t tried using any of this stuff. Just moving around has been giving me a backlash, let alone trying to turn lead into gold or whatever. Even if I wasn’t, I can’t access my spirit domains on Earth right now.”

“Jason, if you can change things on a basic-rules-of-reality level, and anyone finds out you can do this...”

“I know. It’ll be a race to who can spirit me away for an alien autopsy faster. But I don’t think it goes that deep. If I could use it to access the node space, like the Builder’s door, I think I’d feel it. I used that door a lot, and this power is a little shallower, I think. I can probably fudge the laws of physics, but not change them.”

“That’s fine,” Farrah said, looking relieved. “Regular magic can do that. Doing it more easily and over a wide area isn’t so big a deal, since it has to be your own territory anyway.”

“So, it’s just the stuff people were already going to be chasing me down over. Hooray.”