

Chapter 424

You Really Aren't Local

Standing on the balcony on the pagoda's top floor, Jason surveyed his spirit domain, stretching off into the distance. He felt his connection to the vast territory, as if it were part of him.

"Stabilise the transformation zone."

A tremor immediately rocked the pagoda and did not pass, instead, continuing as a constant rumble. The entire pagoda felt like it was being hauled on a truck with mediocre suspension.

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- You are using your spirit domain to stabilise and separate an intermingled transformation zone and proto-space. Dissolution of the proto-space will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the attached reality.
 - Consolidating the proto-space into a permanent astral space will lessen the detrimental effects of the process.
 - Would you like to consolidate the proto-space into an astral space Y/N?

Jason's eyes went wide, delighted at anything that would increase the chances of success.

"Yes!"

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- Consolidating the astral space will require the consumption of [Stable Genesis Cores]. How many [Stable Genesis Cores] will you dedicate to this process?

"All of them!"

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- 1327 [Stable Genesis Cores] have been consumed. Proto-space apotheosis will take place alongside transformation zone reality integration.

The rumbling tremor grew into a full-blown earthquake and Jason started seeing chunks of street tear themselves out of the ground to float into the air, shrouded in rainbow light. Tiles ripped themselves out from the footpaths and planters broke apart, spilling dirt and flowers as chunks of stone drifted upwards like errant balloons. Flagstones of dark crystal lifted out of the road to join them, and in every place that broke apart, rainbow light shone from the holes left behind. Jason watched the shattering of his domain spread out from the central site of the pagoda, accelerating as it extended throughout the city.

An increasing density of rainbow light filled the air, obscuring Jason's vision as he stepped back from the edge of the balcony. The light filled the air but did not encroach on the pagoda, including the balcony space where Jason stood. The last thing he saw before his vision was obscured entirely was the spreading damage reaching the forest beyond the city.

As the process continued, Jason's connection to his spirit domain delivered increasing levels of painful feedback. It started small, barely noticeable as the first chunks broke away. By the time he could no longer see past the edge of the balcony he was grimacing against the pain but it was nothing he couldn't endure. Even as it continued to escalate, he didn't let out a yell.

If Jason's soul had been weaker, the pain the process was inflicting would likely have scarred it, pushing it to grow stronger. Compared to what he had experienced in the past, though, this was insufficient to even make a dent. Compared to the Builder's attacks or even the backlash from trying to forcibly manipulate reality with his aura, this pain was water splashing his feet at the beach. Rather than push back or try and shield himself from the pain, Jason delved into it with his senses, trying to better understand the process taking place.

Everyone outside the dome was scrambling. Ritualists from different Network splinter factions were rushing to study the changes in the dome while others were preparing to either charge forward or run for the hills, depending on how the dome changed.

Many more people had come for this transformation zone than those in the past. The original hope had been that multiple reality cores would appear when the dome finally dropped. As the dome remained in place longer and longer, eclipsing the duration of any previous one, those desires had grown more avaricious. The factions were now anticipating unknown treasures, untold knowledge and untapped power, all waiting to be seized. If they had to shake it out of Jason Asano, that was something they were willing to do.

Gerling only paid half-attention to Cleary, his handler, as Cleary briefed him on the directives of the higher-ups. Gerling's assistant Fiona would summarise any relevant points afterwards and his gold-rank mind could easily split his focus anyway.

He cared little for the priorities of the people ostensibly above him, but so long as they controlled the reality core supply, he had to keep up appearances. He could always grab some cores and go rogue but Gerling knew that was a foolish move until he had more

long-term plans. For the moment, it would be borrowing trouble without anything worthwhile to show for it, so he continued playing the easy-to-please thug.

“Do you understand?” Cleary asked.

“Understand what?” Gerling asked. “You did all that talking to tell me what I already knew. Go in when the dome drops, take anything I find and kick the crap out of anyone who gets in my way. Maybe I should be giving the briefings.”

Cleary sighed.

“That’s an... adequate summation. Just don’t start trouble you can’t finish.”

Gerling held up a tight fist.

“There isn’t any trouble I can’t finish.”

Jason didn’t ignore the pain stabbing into his soul through his connection to the spirit domain. He followed it with his senses, using it as a path into the heart of the changes taking place.

Jason had spent some time now in the study of astral magic theory, but it was his time exploring node space, coming to grips with the building blocks of reality where his understanding had truly grown. Being in node space was like brushing his fingers over the individual atoms of a molecule.

There was a dichotomy between the astral and the physical, a duality that seemed not just naturally disparate but intrinsically opposed. The difference between the universe and the astral was the divide between physical and spiritual, between body and soul.

Jason knew this separation was not absolute, despite almost every aspect of reality signalling that it was. His own body merged the spiritual and the physical into a cohesive whole. Knowing was not the same as understanding, however.

Having extended his senses into the wild magic of the transforming domain, he observed from the inside the interplay of the astral and the physical as the transformation zone was extricated from the proto-space. The spirit domain was a part of him, giving him unique insight as it went through the process of merging with physical reality.

Jason's understanding underwent its own transfiguration as his perspective, so long contextualised only by physical reality, expanded exponentially. His grasp of the astral went through explosive expansion, giving him a new understanding of the most fundamental aspects of the cosmos.

“Some secrets are not meant for the likes of you,” a voice said and Jason withdrew his senses. Startled at the intrusion and angry at the interruption, he turned to face the owner of the voice.

Jason had not sensed the man's approach nor the opening of the portal arch behind him. It was quite unlike Jason's portals, other than the general arch shape, looking like a pile of hard, earthen bricks stacked loosely in place. The portal energy in the archway was a swirl of reds, browns and yellows.

The man standing in front of the portal had a shock of red hair and pale skin with a freckled complexion. His eyes were an inhumanly bright green. Compared to his striking features, his clothes were simple robes that were loose but not bulky enough to entangle, leaving him with excellent freedom of movement. It was much like the design Jason preferred, but while Jason favoured black, grey and red tones, this man's robes were in light, earthy shades. Combined with his hair and complexion, it made him look like a Scottish Jedi.

"Do you know Ewan McGregor?" Jason asked.

"That is what you're asking in this situation?" the man said, letting a little of his diamond-rank aura show.

"It's what came to mind," Jason said. "Obi-Wan Kenobi? Nothing? You really aren't local, are you?"

"I am Shako," he man said. "I am a servant of the Builder."

"I know," Jason said. "I picked up on your star seed when you tried to impress me by letting your aura poke out of your pants. Please tell me the builder didn't just blow up my world by shoving a ranga through the dimensional wall."

"No," Shako said. "This event provides a window through which I am able to enter and leave without harming your world, so long as I am gone before this space reasserts itself in physical reality."

"So the Builder thought he'd take the chance to send someone in and off me?"

"No," Shako said. "He sent me to deliver his thanks."

"For what?"

"The current Builder inherited the power of his predecessor, but also his responsibilities. He inherited the mistake that was this world. It costs him nothing but dignity should this world be annihilated but the dignity of a great astral being is no small thing."

"Really? Sounds like a holdover from his mortal days, to me. What does an infinite being care about dignity? It seems a little petty."

"Be careful with your words, mortal."

"Mate, your boss sucks."

Shako's expression went very blandly diplomatic.

“You did not encounter him in the best of vessels,” Shako said. “Thadwick Mercer lingered like a disease, affecting even subsequent vessels for a time.”

“Vessels like you?” Jason surmised.

“Yes,” Shako confirmed and Jason laughed.

“You caught a dose of Thadwick, that's hilarious. Also, tell your boss to shove it up his arse. Thadwick was a top-shelf prick but he didn't turn your boss into a cosmic land bandit. He didn't strip astral spaces off worlds, killing people in job lots from the fallout. How many people has it been across all the realities and all the worlds? Billions? Trillions? He can take his thanks for whatever he's thanking me for and shove it so far up his quoin that it pops out his nose.”

“How... colourful. You don't want the gift he offers as parts of his thanks, then?”

“Your damn right I don't. Thus far, everything the Builder has sent my way has impaled my body a whole bunch of times and even took a run at my soul.”

“This gift is sent with gratitude, not malice.”

“It wasn't? You should have led with that. I'm definitely going to take the word of a guy whose boss tried to core me like an apple.”

“You would do well not to impugn my integrity, silver-ranker.”

“Mate, you're a captain in the fleet of a cosmic pirate admiral. How many people have you killed in the name of your boss playing with blocks like an infant? I'd tell you to take your integrity and shove it up your boss' arse, next to where he put his thanks, but you beat me to it. Probably by a few centuries.”

Shako reached out and Jason lurched forward, his neck falling into Shako's grip. His aura crushed down, suppressing Jason's aura in an instant.

“So, more Vader than Obi-Wan,” Jason said, his voice unstifled by the grip on his throat. “Obvious, now that I think about it.”

Jason met the diamond-ranker's gaze, unfazed by having his aura ground down to nothing.

“You think I won't kill you for your insolence?” Shako asked.

“If you're going to kill me, I can do bugger-all about it. I'm not going to pretend your boss is worthy of respect first because he's not, and I don't think it matters anyway. Your boss sent you here with orders to kill me or not. I'm willing to bet you follow them, either way.”

Jason closed his eyes, letting his instinct guide him. He drew on his spirit domain and the vast quantities of power currently coursing through it as reality itself was reshaped.

Melding it with his suppressed aura, Jason aura projected not his own aura but that of his entire spirit domain, pushing back against the suppressive force of the diamond ranker.

Shako sneered as he felt Jason attempt to push back, but it dropped off his face as he felt the aura pressure him from all around. Jason's inexpert control of his spirit domain was not enough to push back the power of an ancient and powerful diamond ranker even a little, but even noticing that moment of pressure from a mere silver-ranker chilled Shako to the core.

Shako's empty hand swung out, splattering Jason's head like a rotting melon. Jason's neck chain fell to the floor as Shako then palm-slapped Jason's chest, the whole torso exploding backwards, scattering across the balcony and into the rainbow energy outside. The force of the strike warped Jason's sword, which was merely bronze-rank. It also fell to the floor.

Jason's scattered body parts burned up in dark flame, limned in silver starlight, which merged to take the shape of a dark, star-filled phoenix. Shako started gathering transcendent light between his hands but the phoenix shot back, disappearing into the rainbow energy.

Another portal appeared next to Shako's portal arch, this one a shimmering sheet of silver-grey light. Through it stepped Dawn in her true body. Her celestine form had ruby hair and eyes, glimmering like actual gemstones.

"That's enough, Shako."