

Chapter 423

Whatever We Face

Jason continued to extend his spirit domain over the industrial wasteland city, seeking to master the battle trance as he fought hordes of anomalies. Although he had touched upon the trance once, it was not a state that he easily found his way into. In some fights, he managed it and others not.

“My understanding of the state is limited, having never experienced it for myself,” Shade said. “From what I do understand, forcibly trying to push your way into it will have little to no success. One of my previous summoners who could use the battle trance described it as finding the balance to stand on the surface of a pond and then letting herself sink into it.”

Due to the nature of the transformation zone, the industrial city was a strange shape, existing in a ring around Jason’s existing domain. Each time he expanded his domain further into it, he made his way around, dealing with the anomalies. It was grim work in a bleak environment with unpleasant enemies but he slogged through, increasingly eager to leave.

When he claimed the final stretch of the city and cleared out the last of the anomalies, he sensed the boss make its appearance. After it was revealed to his aura senses, Jason went to scout it out. It was large, three metres tall and almost as wide. A hideously overdone version of the bad franks, it was a pile of mismatched, sick and fatty flesh, roughly stitched together. Only the crude iron exoskeleton bolted directly into the flesh held the blubbery mound in place.

It had faces on both sides of its flabby head and three thick, stubby legs holding it up like a tripod. It was not an elegant design, forcing the awkward creature to lumber slowly around. The arms, of which it had four, were the only part of it not sagging with fat. Far too long for its body, they were made of hard, toned muscle.

Held in its oversized arms were a pair of heavy gatling guns that looked quite similar to Jason’s, although there were some important differences. Instead of a hopper at the top to seat an unstable genesis core, these were fed heavy bullets from a belt that ran out of the abomination’s body, through the gun and then back into the anomaly.

“Is it some kind of freaky bullet golem? It’s a shame I can’t risk using the core launcher because that thing is not zippy.”

“The arms seem much more flexible,” Shade observed. “You should not underestimate its ability to manoeuvre those guns in your direction.”

"It'll do a better job than me at least," Jason agreed. "My minigun weighs about as much as an economy hatchback."

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully as they watched the boss anomaly shamble awkwardly down the street.

"You know," he said, "I can't use the core launcher."

"Yes," Shade said.

"The thing is, though, I'm not the only one here."

"Oh dear," Shade said.

Jason sprinted through the building as bullets tore into it, ripping through the steel wall to chase him as the anomaly walked its gun after him, spitting flame from the rotating barrels as the bullets streamed out. When he came to a hole in the floor he didn't avoid it or leap over but instead dropped straight down to the floor below. The line of bullets continued to trail him, dropping down and following as he turned and ran back in the direction he had come from.

Jason had found that while the abomination was oblivious to him up to a certain range. The moment he crossed that threshold, the anomaly's eyes locked onto him. Even through walls its gaze never wavered, as it immediately swung one of its guns on him.

Jason had been ready and opened up with his own minigun, managing to destroy one of the monstrosity's guns before it fired. As it turned the other on him, though, Jason's minigun seized up. The tremendous forces that had pumped through it as Jason used it to kill hundreds, if not thousands of anomalies finally took it past its limits.

Jason was forced to drop the weapon and run as bullets started screaming through the air, punching through everything in their path. Shade's ability to hide Jason from abnormal senses could likely have shielded him from the abomination's power to see through walls but that would defeat the point of playing decoy.

A dark shape dashed from the shadows of a building to approach the boss anomaly. Shade took the core launcher from his personal storage space. Although it was much lighter than the minigun, it still pushed the limits of what Shade could lift with his limited ability to impart physical force.

Shade dropped in an unstable genesis core and fired and, as Jason had anticipated, the launcher malfunctioned. It operated by agitating an unstable core, then wrapping it in a short-lived containment field and launching it. The containment field failed to activate and the weapon exploded on the spot, annihilating Shade's body and sprinkling the abomination across the city.

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- You have defeated [Greater Anomaly].
 - You have overtaken a genesis space territory and purged all anomalous elements.
 - Return to core territory to initiate transfiguration of new territory.
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“That was unpleasant,” Shade said, another of his bodies emerging from Jason’s shadow. “Being torn apart by firmamental cosmic forces is not something I’d care to repeat.”

“Sorry about that,” Jason said as he clambered out through a hole in the bullet-riddled building. “Any lingering damage?”

“No,” Shade said. “You can reconstitute the lost shadow body with mana as usual.”

Jason found a gobbet of the boss anomaly and looted it, wisps of rainbow smoke appearing across the city where the remnants of the abomination were spread.

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- 100 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 1000 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 10000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

 - [Doom Orb] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Flesh Essence] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Awakening Stone of Flesh] has been added to your inventory.
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“That’s a decent haul,” Jason said. “I’m not sure that the doom orb is going to help me out, though. If I’m breaking out of this place, I won’t need to unseal any more powers.

“Perhaps you should keep it, then,” Shade suggested. “A use can almost always be found for exotic items, even if that use was not what was originally intended.”

“Good point,” Jason said. “Some exotic items are more appealing than others, though.”

Jason went to the edge of his new territory, took out all his leftover unstable genesis cores and lobbed them into the gloom with all the silver-rank strength he could muster.

“I don’t want those things going boom the second we’re out of here. Do you think that gold-ranker blew up when he took them out?”

“Perhaps,” Shade said. “It seems equally likely that the cores disrupted his passage through the portal. He may have never come out the other side, his soul cast into the astral for my progenitor to claim.”

“What about the stable cores?” Jason asked. “I have a boatload of them. I’m kind of hoping they can help me stabilise the node space as I try to realign this link between worlds.”

“I think it will be safe,” Shade said. “Perhaps they can even be used to repair some of the transformation zones. Miss Dawn would be better equipped to advise you in this.”

“That would be nice.”

Nikoleta and her family gawked at the indoor waterfall in the atrium of Jason’s pagoda, although after all they’d been through it was just one more thing on the pile of absurdity.

“This is your last chance to leave this place before I bring down the dome,” Jason said. “I don’t know what effect that will have. If you wish, I can send you outside first, but I can make no promises about what awaits you there either.”

“We have made our choice,” Nikoleta said, although her grandparents looked unhappy.

“Then I can offer you a suite to wait it out or you can observe from one of the balconies.”

“We’ll watch,” Nikoleta said.

“Very well.”

Jason was nervous and didn’t want to pass that along to the family, so he was uncharacteristically subdued. They took the elevator to the top floor and Jason led them out to look over his domain. The city extended out a few kilometres, beyond which was the forest spanning into the distance. Rising up beyond that were the windswept, agrarian highlands where he had found the family, the only survivors of the zone he had discovered. Unseen beyond those highlands was the wasteland city, waiting to be transformed.

“Transfigure new territory,” Jason murmured. They could not see the subsequent changes, although there was an industrial clanking that must have been cacophonous to be heard more than fifty kilometres away, through a range of hills and small mountains. Jason could feel the changes through his connection to the spirit domain, knowing that the once wasted city was being restored to a pristine industrial hub.

“Not that it does me any good.”

“Pardon?” Nikoleta asked.

“It’s nothing,” Jason said.

Jason estimated that the dome in the real world covered an area equivalent to his first and second territories, the pagoda and the city around it. His expectation was that when the transformation zone and the proto-space were separated, the city would remain. The rest he expected to be caught up in the proto-space as it disentangled from the transformation zone. He might even need to enter the now-separated dimensional space and eliminate an anchor monster to prevent a monster wave.

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- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
 - Territory has been renamed [Steamforge Circuit].

 - Anomalies attacking as a result of further spirit domain expansion will have increased power.

 - You have claimed sufficient territory to stabilise the transformation zone and separate it from the convergent astral space.

 - Separating the space with the current territory will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the surrounding reality. Claim additional territory to reduce the severity of this effect. Current severity reduction: 79.4%

 - Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?
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“That should be enough,” Jason said.

“Are you talking to the thing that lives in your shadow?” Nikoleta asked.

“He’s not a thing,” Jason said, not turning to look at her.

“He’s not human.”

“Neither are you!” Jason snapped, drawing all eyes. He panned his gaze over them.

“I’ve changed my mind. Shade, show them to a suite to wait this out.”

One of Shade's bodies emerged and led the family away as they threw wary glances back at Jason, who was quickly left alone. He thumped his hands angrily into the balustrade, then ran them anxiously over his face.

“They didn’t deserve that,” he said.

“You are under an understandable amount of stress, Mr Asano.”

“No one could ask for more,” Shade said, another body rising from Jason’s shadow.

“Yes they could,” Jason said. “If I do this and it isn’t enough, that’s game over. The world dies and not only did I fail to stop it but I probably sped it up.”

“Mr Asano, there are very few things in the cosmos that are truly new. I cannot say if what you are doing here is one of them but it is as far as I am aware and I have seen and heard more than you can imagine.”

“Great. I get to be the first guy to dissolve his planet in a new and interesting way.”

“Mr Asano—”

“I get it, Shade, bloody hell.”

“Jason!” Shade yelled, causing Jason’s head to make a startled swivel as he turned to his familiar.

“No one could ask for more,” Shade repeated, his voice once more composed.

“Whatever we face here, we face together.”

Jason felt the presence of his other familiars in his soul, silently supporting him. He looked out at his spirit domain.

“Stabilise the transformation zone.”

Outside the dome, the vast corpse of the tentacle monster lay sprawled where it had slid off the dome, having been killed in a pitched battle with the gathered magical factions. The different factions had already carved large chunks of it off, taking them away to study, while others continued to pore over the corpse. It had rapidly grown to the size of a three-storey building, looking like a humungous sea anemone. Its massive trunk of a body was topped by a huge maw ringed by a forest of prehensile tentacles. The tentacles grabbed people, tossing them into the mouth, killing many before the assembled group finally killed it.

Jack Gerling looked at it from the camp set up by the American Network. His explosive powers had been critical in slaying the massive creature that used to be the gold-ranker, Guo.

While inside the combined proto-space/transformation zone, Gerling had felt small for the first time in a very long time. He contemplated the kind of magic involved, not just in transforming the gold ranker but the world itself in the form of transformation zones. The growing and unruly magic could reshape the world and the most powerful people on it, leaving them with no ability to resist.

This was true for all but one person and his enigmatic struggle against cosmic forces Gerling did not understand. He didn’t know how or why Asano was able to fight against powers that could reshape the world itself. His ability to open the previously impenetrable dome proved that he could, however. Gerling was determined to find out, and then find a way to take that power for himself.

Gerling felt a shift in the magic a moment before he saw the dome change. The swirling rainbow of the colours inside went wild, gradually going dark around the edges. Deep within the dome, the colour coalesced and changed, turning from rainbow chaos into a nebula pattern. An aura erupted from the dome, Gerling’s aura senses detecting its

spread extending dozens of kilometres away. Gerling recognised the aura as belonging to Jason Asano.