

Chapter 581

No Points of Conflict

Jason's cloud house had undergone yet another transformation when he accidentally spent some of the authority he had taken from the Builder on it. It was currently in the form of a pagoda made from smoky crystal, which was dark but for speckles of gold, silver and blue light dancing within it. It was the same as the pagodas at the heart of Jason's permanent spirit domains on Earth.

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- You have infused the [Cloud Flask] with authority possessing dimension and construction aspects.
 - Cloud constructs created by the flask will have enhanced defence against physical and dimensional incursion.
 - Your ability to influence the fundamental rules of reality within the temporary spirit domains of cloud constructs is increased, matching your ability to do so in permanent spirit domains.
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In the moment, Jason had added the message to the growing list of system windows he had minimised. After checking some of them and being frustrated that he couldn't fully explore the ramifications in his weakened state, he had started putting them off until he was stronger. There were also more important issues at hand.

"Someone on this planet needs to invent permanent markers," Jason said, leaning down to peer at Shako's blank face from up close. "Do you have something I can draw on him with?"

"Jason."

"Yes, Dawn?"

"Do not draw on Shako's face."

"Why not?"

"Because you're not nine. Or in a fraternity."

"Fine," Jason complained. "Are you sure he's going to be alright? I think whatever your boss did to him messed him up pretty bad."

"No, I'm not sure. But I don't think the World-Phoenix did something to Shako. I think she did something to the Builder, and that change affected the vessel he was inhabiting."

"He went totally berserk."

Jason sat back down on the cloud couch, sitting just outside of his spirit domain. They looked at Shako, still sitting on his knees in blank-faced catatonia.

“What is going on with the Builder?” he asked. “I’ve met him a few times now, and it’s like there’s two of him. One is calm and impassive, while the other is petty, and hot-headed. Childish, even. I thought it was about using Thadwick as a vessel, especially after talking to you about it, but there’s more to it.”

“Shako has been erratic while channelling the Builder,” Dawn agreed, joining Jason on the couch. “Like you, I put it down to vessel bleed-through, but after this...”

Jason gave her a sympathetic look.

“Your boss came out of that looking pretty shady.”

“I know. But the World-Phoenix feels no need to explain itself, so it doesn’t, even if doing so could eliminate a simple misunderstanding. If others think the worst of it, it doesn’t care. If a mountain climber’s shoes are untied, that doesn’t matter to the mountain.”

“First the god of Purity isn’t the god of Purity, and now this? What’s going on with all these transcendent beings?”

“I don’t know. But it implies trouble.”

“No kidding. Do you know what sanctioning is?”

“More than you I imagine, but not really. Just as the greater secrets of gold and diamond ranks are kept from you, the secrets of transcendence are kept from me.”

“Wait, there are greater secrets of gold and diamond rank.”

“No.”

“There aren’t there? No one tells me anything. I should refuse to save the world anymore until people start telling me things.”

“Why were you asking about Sanctioning?”

“What? Oh, well, they sanctioned the original Builder, right? What if sanctioning is taking someone and slapping the a new person over the top, like painting dogs playing poker over a masterpiece?”

“You need to stop watching heist movies.”

“No I don’t. Anyway, what if the paint in my metaphor is starting to wear thin? Maybe the old Builder is starting to poke through and it’s driving the new one bonkers?”

“Bonkers?”

“Bananas. Fruit loops. Too many dips into the nut bag. Why are all these euphemisms for being crazy food? Do we have any of those fritters left?”

He looked around, seeing the plate he had left on the table now on the grass in pieces. The clash between the vessels of the Builder and World-Phoenix had sent it flying.

“That’s a waste,” he said. Jason’s familiars were still present and Shade started cleaning up the pieces of broken plate.

“I’ll be quite thorough, Mr Asano. The neighbourhood children do like to play on the grass here, by the river.”

The river running next to Jason’s house spilled off the cliff in a waterfall. Shako had broken the magical barrier that stopped children from going over the edge, through.

“Thank you, Shade. Make sure no children play in the river until the barrier is restored.”

“Should I inform Mayor Pelli?”

“I have a sneaking suspicion she knows, but go ahead and make sure, thank you.”

One of Shade’s bodies went off and Dawn joined Jason in watching another pick up the broken pieces of plate.

“There weren’t any fritters left,” she said. “Shako ate most of them.”

They looked at Shako again.

“Is someone going to come pick him up, or was it a released-on-your-own-recognisance kind of deal?”

“A representative of the Sundered Throne has already been watching us for a while. Haven’t you, Carmen?”

The air high above the pagoda shimmered and an entity appeared. It was the size of a person and looked like a cloak drifting in the air, filled with nebulous energy. It looked similar enough to Gordon that Jason glanced at his familiar, but there were notable differences. The nebula inside did not look like an eye but a mountain. The colours were more subdued, with shades of dark brown and pale blue. Like Gordon, smaller representations of the nebula were inside orbs that circled the entity as it descended through the air. Compared to Gordon’s six, this entity had twelve of the orbs.

Jason’s senses were a little recovered after exchanging energy with Dawn earlier, but he could not sense the aura of the descending entity. When it spoke, it did so by manipulating sound waves with tremulations from one of it’s orbs. The voice reverberated, like a person speaking through a tube.

“Your senses have grown sharp, Dawn. Will you be making the transition soon?”

“Soon, Carmen. Only a decade or so.”

She glanced at Jason, then back to the entity.

“I have one last errand.”

The entity, Carmen, reached ground level and one of her orbs floated over to Jason.

“So, this is the mortal the World-Phoenix chose for you. He’s a bit of an oddity, but I suppose he’d have to be. It would not give you anyone ordinary.”

Carmen’s voice came from the orb in front of Jason.

“Greetings, outworlder. I am Carmen of the Sundered Throne.”

“G’day. I’m Jason of... I don’t know anymore, if I’m being honest.”

“Being otherwise would be pointless.”

“Are you a friend of Dawn’s?”

“We move in similar circles, but are more friendly than friends. There is a requisite detachment with my role.”

“I can respect professionalism.”

“And I can respect kindness.”

An orb floated over to Gordon and joined the orbs floating around him.

“You have taken good care of this child,” Carmen said.

“He’s taken good care of me.”

“You are unlike most essence users that take my kind as familiars. They are happy to use them, but never think to love them.”

“Relationships based around mutual benefits are exhausting. I like friendship. And trust.”

A trilling sound came from Carmen’s orbs and Jason realised she was laughing. The orb near Gordon and Jason flew back to resume its orbit of Carmen.

“Your master certainly found you an interesting one, Dawn. I wonder if perhaps she might regret it by the time all is done.”

“Jason and the World-Phoenix have no points of conflict.”

“And he has trouble enough ahead of him, doesn’t he?”

An orb flew back to Jason.

“Would you like me to tell you what Dawn is keeping from you Jason Asano?”

“No.”

“No?”

“I trust that she’s doing it for a reason.”

“There is so much about her you don’t know.”

“I don’t know a lot about aeroplanes, either, but I fly around in them just fine.”

“Mr Asano, you were in a plane that exploded,” Shade pointed out.

“And I was fine, thank you Shade.”

Orbs flew out to examine Jason’s other familiars; Shade and the blood-clone form of Colin.

“Still out exploring I see, Shade.”

“As ever, Miss Carmen.”

“As ever? Umber told me that he had you trapped in some astral space for a few centuries. He said it was to teach you a lesson about duty.”

“Umber likes to play games when my power is limited by a vessel, thinking that it somehow brings him esteem. He fails to grasp the nuances that differentiate duty, loyalty and obedience. He would do well to attend a butlering school.”

Carmen let out a trilling laugh.

“Your new companions seem to have bet it all on Asano, here, but you are still unwilling to pin yourself down? Did Umber’s trick make you a little commitment-shy?”

“Umber does not enter my thinking. Colin and Gordon are young, and the young make important decisions more easily than they should.”

“Yes they do. A shadow of the Reaper, an echo of annihilation and a world-eater. Do you know where your friend Colin comes from, Jason Asano?”

“I don’t really do background checks,” Jason said.

“The deep astral doesn’t have geography, as you would understand it, but it’s the closest concept you can understand, being a physical being. There is what I’ll call a region of the deep astral where the influence of two very different astral beings meet. The region of the All-Devouring Eye is where I, and your friend Gordon come from, and it abuts the realm of Legion, the great astral being whom administers life in the cosmos. Your sanguine horror comes from this place, where life and annihilation are neighbours.”

“That explains quite a lot,” Jason said, wandering over to Colin, who looked like Jason himself, but made of blood. “It doesn’t matter where he comes from, though. He’s a good boy.”

Colin opened his mouth and a horrifying alien screech came out.

“No, that does not mean you get to eat Shako. He has to go with the nice lady. Also, he’s probably a bit tough for you, until you get older. You’d just break your teeth.”

“You have a domineering collection of familiars for such an affable man, Jason Asano. Perhaps destiny knew you would need them.”

“Please tell me destiny isn’t some other great astral being I’ll have to deal with.”

Carmen laughed again.

“Thankfully not.”

“Do you have to take Shako now? I have some burning questions for him, and his boss wanted to let me know something.”

“What happened to the Builder while possessing Shako will require some time to recover from. Your questions will have to wait, but I imagine you can figure out the broad strokes.”

Jason frowned.

“What the World-Phoenix did to him. He wanted to tell me about that, didn't he?”

“That is not my place to say.”

An orb floated over to Shako and it turned into a shield, which Gordon's orbs could also do. Carmen's shield was pale blue and appeared under Shako, lifting him like a platform.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Jason Asano, Colin. Dawn, Shade; always a pleasure. Gordon, you watch out for Jason here. He has hard days ahead and seems very good at getting into trouble.”

“Who have you been talking to?” Jason asked, affronted.

Carmen laughed again.

“I do hope you survive to grow up, Jason Asano. I look forward to meeting you again at that time. As for you, Dawn, don't dally too long. Coming to grips with your mortality is important, but so is letting it go.”

Carmen floated into the air with Shako and a portal opened into a starry void. She passed through and it closed.

“Well,” Jason said. “This has been fun. Want to do some day drinking?”