

Chapter 591

What Light Does

“It changed again,” Jason said, looking around his soul space. “Not that I wasn’t expecting it. It’s been changing on the regular, and with losing the bridge and the door, plus gaining the throne and the...”

He sensed strange energies centred on Dawn. She had let go of his hand and staggered, trying to stay on her feet. Jason felt something inside of her, like an unplugged cable, trying to attach itself to the energy of their environment, which was comprised of his soul.

Jason’s power over his soul space was greater than ever and he magically isolated Dawn from the rest of the soul space. She stood up straight, her stricken expression calming.

“Thank you,” she said. “I wasn’t sure what to expect, but that was unpleasant.”

“What was it?” Jason asked.

“I have been connected to the World-Phoenix through my star seed ever since I chose to enter its service,” Dawn explained. “Even when I can’t commune with the World-Phoenix, such as when I am in your spirit domain, the connection remains. Here, however, the connection is lost. My star seed attempted to connect to something else.”

“Me.”

“Yes.”

“I’m pretty sure that would kill me. I’m not a great astral being.”

“You may be right. If we were attached like that, I would drain you like a diamond-rank energy vampire. Unless you could draw enough power from the astral, it would kill you.”

Jason had been trickling energy from the astral through his soul space to sustain himself for a long time. Eliminating his need for regular spirit coin consumption was one thing, but taking the place of a great astral being in a symbiotic soul link with a peak-level diamond-ranker was another.

“I’m not looking to put that to the test,” Jason said. “Also, I’m pretty sure that if I survived the process, I wouldn’t survive your boss finding out.”

“True,” Dawn said with a smile.

“I thought you said it was safe.”

“I said it was safe for you.”

“Are you going to have trouble re-establishing your connection once you leave?”

“I don't know. I doubt it because the star seed is still intact. It's rather odd, not having that connection anymore.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, it's just... the World-Phoenix has been with me since I was not much older than you are now. I forgot what being truly alone feels like. It's a little disorienting.”

“Alone, you say. I'll try not to be too hurt by that.”

“Stop teasing; you know what I mean.”

He flashed her a grin.

“Should we get you out of here?” He asked. “Get that connection up and running again?”

“Is it a strain to keep me isolated like this?”

“Not at all.”

“Then let's take our time. The star seed is quite robust and I have all of eternity to be connected to the World-Phoenix.”

Jason resumed looking around his again-reshaped soul space. The portal arch they had come through was still standing but the energy within had vanished, closing it off until Jason opened it again. It was located at the edge of what would be a large public square, if there had been a public to inhabit it. In the centre of the square was the familiar pagoda, although this one was larger than those in Jason's spirit domains. It was notably wider and ten storeys instead of the usual five.

Jason floated into the air, not using his cloak as wings but simply using his power over the environment. He lifted Dawn up alongside him as they rose to take in the entire space. The sky above was the same clear blue of the world outside, the sun beaming down on what turned out to be an island. It looked to be roughly thirty kilometres by fifteen, with widely differing elevations. There was a small mountain, sandy beaches and what looked to be an area sunk below sea level.

There was a lagoon at the opposite end of the island to the mountain, with a small town running along the shore. A larger population centre, minus the population, was located in the middle of the island. This was where the pagoda square was located. The rest of the island was covered in various terrain, much of which Jason recognised from the previous iteration of his soul space. Plantlife dominated, ranging from carefully manicured gardens to dense jungle, although open pathways wound through even the wildest of areas. Jason could also feel a network of tunnels and caverns running underneath the island, filled with luminescent fungus.

Waterways were all over, from creeks running through the jungle, to underground rivers, to garden water features, to canals in and around the larger town. Jason knew that these were the physical representations of magic flowing in and out from the astral, supplying power to this space, along with his spirit domains, his cloud house and his own body. He could feel the magic moving, like blood through a circulatory system.

“How do you feel?” Dawn asked him.

“Like... I don't want to say it.”

“Like a god.”

Jason nodded.

“It feels wrong to say out loud,” he said softly.

“The truth is, Jason, you're more than a god here. Gods belong to their world, but they don't embody it. They have to share, and they're expendable. Look at Purity. But you don't belong to this world; you are this world.”

“I'm not sure I like having this kind of power. I don't think I can trust myself with it.”

“Then leave this place empty and have power over no one. Your power does not extend beyond it, so as omnipotent as you are here, outside it you are largely unchanged.”

“Largely?”

“There are a few things we should talk about. Oh, and you've almost certainly stopped aging.”

“Wait, what? You're saying I'm never going to die?”

“Of course you're going to die. Probably a lot; you can't seem to help yourself. Just not from old age.”

“Huh. I think I'll have to sit with that one a while before it sinks in.”

“The truth is, you've probably been ageless since you accepted the World-Phoenix's blessing and changed your body. At the very least it would have expanded your life cycle by orders of magnitude.”

“You never felt the need to tell me?”

“Jason, I've seen enough people hit diamond rank to know what someone who probably will look like. Soramir saw the same thing, the first time he met you. Adventurers who are going to make it have something about them; on your world, they call it the X factor. You have it, Sophie has it. Rufus has it, even with all that self-doubt. Emir Bahadir saw it in you. Even Rufus himself. He talks a lot about coming from a school, but he's seen a lot of adventurers, good and bad. He knew you had it from the beginning.”

“What about my other friends?”

“It’s a good team you have. They all have the potential, although some in different ways than others. Gary and Travis will have to take a craftsman’s path. They both use monster cores, now.”

“Can you even get to diamond using cores?” Jason asked.

“There is more to high-rank progress than simply killing monsters or absorbing cores. In many ways, those dedicated to a craft have an advantage in this regard. But these are things that will be shared with you as you draw closer to gold rank.”

“Wouldn’t it help to know them now?”

“Don’t be distracted. Silver rank is the last time essence users get to advance by simply charging headlong into adventure. Enjoy this time. And you have enough to be going on with, Jason.”

“That’s definitely true. Hey, what about my spirit domains?”

“What about them?”

“You said my power doesn’t extend beyond this realm, but I have my spirit domains.”

“There is only so much you can do with them. Especially for now.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you know a lot more about where this is all going than me?”

“I know a lot more about everything than you.”

He looked at her with arched eyebrows.

“Everything that matters,” she corrected. “Eighties television does not count.”

Jason looked out to the horizon where his senses grew fuzzy.

“Astral space rules?” he asked.

“Yes. Things will grow strange at the limits of the space as what is real and what isn’t becomes uncertain.”

“The space here is fixed,” Jason observed. “In its previous state, the region was mutable. It wouldn’t only change according to my directions, but also on its own. I can still reshape it, but it feels a lot more set in place now.”

“It’s a more stable reality. You’ll realise, in time, that your ability to control it is far more intricate than you currently understand. Shall we explore it a little?”

“No,” Jason said. “I’ve been waiting on learning about the astral throne and the astral gate for far too long. Let’s go take a look at them.”

“What’s it like?” Dawn asked as they descended through the sky. “On some level, you know this place down to the smallest particle, do you not? Is it all in your mind at once?”

“Not even close. That sounds like some god-level thinking-about-everything-at-once stuff. It’s more like knowing mathematics. You’re not consciously thinking about it, but when you need to calculate your points at the end of a Eurogame, you remember how addition works without thinking about it.”

“Or multiplication.”

“I still don’t understand how that is your problem with *Bunny Kingdom*. It’s not difficult and you have the mind of an ancient and powerful diamond ranker.”

“My problem isn’t the multiplication.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Why are you so caught up on this? I’m allowed to not like things.”

Jason grumbled as they landed back in the square, in front of the pagoda’s large double doors. The building was made of the now-familiar dark crystal with sparkles of light shifting within its smoky opacity. The other buildings in the soul space were all comprised of primarily white cloud material, with sunset-coloured trim. This included the ones surrounding the massive, open square.

“I don’t like that this reminds me of the worship squares they have in Pallimustus,” Jason said.

“This place all comes from you,” Dawn reminded him.

“Everyone has things they don’t like about themselves.”

He looked up at the looming tower.

“Astral throne. I bet there’s a throne room.”

“You don’t know?”

“There is,” he said wearily. “I knew it the moment I wondered.”

They moved to the doors, which opened on their own, and entered into a larger version of the atrium that made up the ground floor of all Jason’s pagodas. This one was more elaborate, complete with the same mezzanine levels from which a waterfall spilled into a pond. The normally open floor space was divided up into areas by walls of greenery and water features spanned by little bridges. There were arches covered in flowering vines and free-standing leafy plants potted directly into the floor. The largest open space was just inside the doors, on the opposite side of which was a desk manned by a shadowy figure.

This was not Shade, although the shadow entity looked a lot like Shade’s earlier incarnations of a hooded figure, before he acquired his butler fetish. The difference was that inside the hood of this cloaked figure was the same nebulous eye that Jason and Gordon had, although this one was the size of a face.

“You have a reception desk,” Dawn said.

“It’s a complicated building,” Jason said. “I’m still not certain what to make of these avatars. They’re a part of this astral throne business, aren’t they?”

“In a roundabout manner. You have them because you are an astral king, which you are because you have an astral realm, which you have because you possess an astral throne and an astral gate.”

“So, yes, is what you’re saying.”

“If you want to be reductive.”

“I’ve got a lot going on right now, Dawn; I’m downright eager to be reductive.”

“Which is always a great idea when you’re dealing with massive interdimensional forces governing states of reality.”

Jason groaned and pointed.

“Elevating platforms are this way.”

As they moved across the atrium, Jason looked around. He flung his arms out flamboyantly and the walls turned transparent, replacing the diffuse ambient light with natural light from outside. He stopped and looked around, not quite satisfied. He floated himself and Dawn a few metres into the air to look around.

“I like the natural light,” he said, “but it’s not filling the room the way I’d like. Too many shadowy areas, with all these standing plants and such.”

“You’re thinking about it like a mortal,” Dawn said.

“What do you mean?”

“If you don’t like what the light does, make it do something else.”

“What? You can’t just change what light does.”

“No. But in this place, *you* can.”

“I don’t know how to do that. How does light work?”

“However you want it to.”

He looked at her sceptically and she pointed up.

“That’s your sun in the sky, Jason. Just try it.”

Jason looked at her with uncertainty, but concentrated and after a moment, the way the room was lit up went through a sequence of changes. At various stages, the light fell differently, strobed, turned blue and for a brief moment, disappearing entirely as it turned into the scent of the ocean.

“You’re not very good at this,” Dawn pointed out as they floated in the dark.

The light came back.

“It wasn’t that long ago I was selling staplers in bulk,” Jason said as the light came back. “Now I’m trying to invent bendy light when all I have for reference is the UV grenades from the second *Blade* movie, and they were hot nonsense. I wasn’t exactly brought up in an environment that primed me to be the dimensional overlord of an admittedly small and empty fief. Not all of us had outworlder parents.”

“Have,” Dawn said. “My parents are still alive.”

“Then why did your boss send you to me instead of them when you needed grounding in mortal sensibilities?”

“We haven’t seen each other in a while. Also, they aren’t the best for keeping someone grounded.”

“No?”

“They have a lot going on.”

“Like what?”

“The specifics don’t matter.”

“It *really* feels like the specifics are going to matter.”

“They’re... often busy with work.”

“Their work being?”

“Administration.”

“Administration?”

“Yes.”

“Administration of what?”

Dawn refused to meet his eyes.

“Dawn...”

“They might rule a small... intergalactic empire.”

Jason burst out laughing.

“Travis was right! You are a magic space princess!”

Dawn glared at him as he continued uproariously laughing.

“You should watch out for chunky slugs who want to put you in a bikini.”

Dawn continued to glare as Jason attempted to smother his laughter and failed miserably.

“You realise you need to finish fixing the light, right?” she asked him.

Jason shook his head as he kept laughing.

“I’m just pointing that out because you’ve set the pond on fire.”

“What? Oh crap.”