

Chapter 323

The King of Everyone

Jason's spirit vault had undergone considerable change, which he discovered on his first entry since accepting the World-Phoenix's power. Fusing the physical and spiritual aspects of his being had a considerable impact on his spiritual space.

The garden itself didn't occupy any more space, which seemed to be a function of rank, but it was much changed from his last visit. It was now a largely hanging garden, with flower-wreathed bamboo trellises hanging over long sections of flagstone paths. The design was dense but immaculate, allowing the sun passage through the various trellis coverings and open sky areas to create artworks of sunlight and flowers.

In the section of the garden where the flowers represented his blood essence abilities, red flowers covered walls running either side of narrow pathways of blood-red flagstone. Overhead, more red flowers made a canopy that only allowed in dappled sunlight, giving the overall impression of walking through an artery.

The area dedicated to his sin essence had starkly contrasted flower beds of black, red, white and gold. Archways of hanging flowers carved the light into hard segmentations of light and shadow.

The dark essence area was now underground, the pathway leading into a subterranean cave system. Luminescent fungus and white flowers that shone like moonlight covered the walls while the floor of the cave was covered in silver grass that apparently required no photosynthesis. Even with the glow of flowers and fungi, it was hard to see in the dark and irregular natural caverns. Even Jason's power to see through darkness was suppressed, although it started working when he concentrated on it. It was, after all, his soul and he was ultimately in control.

The doom essence area used medium-sized trees to create different levels of light throughout. The paths were simple grass trails between bushes and trees. Some of the bushes were explosions of red and orange that, under the light coming through the trees looked like a fire. Other places had tall, narrow hedges covered in gold, white and silver flowers. The unobstructed light shining on them gave them an appearance reminiscent of Jason's transcendent finishing attacks.

A creek now led into the garden from under one of the walls, winding through the various sections of the garden and crossed by a series of small bridges. In the doom section, the bridges were rustic wood. The sin area had bridges of marbled black and

white obsidian. In the blood section, the creek was only heard and not seen, adding to the sensation of being inside a living vein.

The creek ultimately dropped from a small waterfall to pool in an underground fairy grotto, the only part of the dark section open to the sky. Even the dimmer parts of that chamber were filled with a rainbow of luminescent fungus, giving it an ethereal beauty.

As far as Jason could tell, the creek represented a trickle of power sourced directly from the astral. He suspected it was the reason he hadn't needed to take a spirit coin to stave off the magic deficit of Earth during the long plane flight.

At the heart of the garden, the gazebo had not only been fully integrated into the garden but transformed into a sprawling pavilion complex, centred on a three-storey pagoda. The marbled obsidian was more white than black, compared to the dark stone of the gazebo, and overgrown with vines and flowers.

Exploring the pagoda, the ground floor was the storage space for his inventory items. To outside observation the bottom floor had walls, but the inside was a different story. Instead of walls, the interior was a platform situated in a starry void. The contents of his inventory floated nearby and beyond that spread out an infinite expanse of stars, galaxies and nebulae. It was like standing in the centre of the universe.

"Bigger on the inside," he muttered. "I suppose I am too, for that matter."

There were two exits, in the form of apertures that reminded Jason of his portal arches. One was the archway through which the garden outside could be seen. The other was a ring floating in the ceiling, situated over an elevating platform, which Jason rode up to the next floor.

The second and third floors of the pagoda were open to the air, much like the old gazebo. The second story was a sitting area, complete with furniture, while the third storey was a meditation room with a luxurious floor of white moss that rivalled his cloud house for softness. Heading back down, he paused in the sitting area and looked at the chairs.

"Why more than one chair?"

He considered the changes to his soul garden had gone through since arriving back home. Until he gained the spirit vault, it had been an unchanging place, aside from the expansion when he ranked up. These new and rapid alterations were obviously a reflection of the changes to his soul. What he needed was some quiet time to adjust and consolidate but there were too many claimants on his time.

With that thought, his mind turned once more to things the new garden had mercifully distracted him from. He was soon back to dwelling on the frustration of his outburst toward the family.

“Damn it,” he scolded himself, his hands wringing impotently at his sides.

“You have a lot to deal with,” Shade said. His familiars had been comfortingly following him around like apocalyptic ducklings. “Miss Hurin’s care, the Network, your family. The changes to the very nature of your being.”

“I know,” Jason said.

“The man who tried to kidnap you and is now at large,” Shade continued to list off, “the EOA, the World-Phoenix, the mysterious painter...”

“I said I know,” Jason snapped, then his whole body sagged. “I’m sorry, Shade. Without you, I wouldn’t have kept my head above water this long. You deserve the opposite of being yelled at. How about a raise?”

“You don’t pay me,” Shade said.

“Of course I do,” Jason said. “I’ve been giving the money to Gordon every week to pass along, haven’t I Gordon?”

Jason’s nebulous familiar gave no reaction.

“See?” Jason said.

“No one will blame you for getting overwhelmed,” Shade said.

“You don’t know my mother that well,” Jason said. “I can’t allow myself to unleash like that. What if I lose control of my aura and give someone an aneurism? It’s stronger than ever and I’m increasingly finding it getting off the leash when I become emotional. The whole reason I ducked in here was that I could feel myself losing what little remained of my cool. The power disparity means that I don’t get to be the one who can’t control himself.”

He groaned, running his hands over his face.

“Shade, I don’t know what to do. I don’t see a path where I can do all the things I need to do without my head popping like a pimple from stress.”

Emi marched into the crowded bar lounge, dragging Farrah by the hand. After drying and putting on clothes, Emi had taken Farrah literally in hand and marched her into the bathroom of Emi’s cabin. She brushed out Farrah’s depression hair, returning her at least a semblance of the appearance she had in Jason’s recordings.

This allowed everyone who had seen the recordings to recognise her on her arrival in the bar lounge, leaving everyone but Asya was startled by her arrival. This was double for Erika and Ian who, like Emi, had watched enough of them to learn Farrah’s fate. Asya had at least seen her when arranging Jason’s flight back to Australia.

Farrah’s gaze was drawn to Asya, whose iron-rank aura stood out amongst the normals. Farrah could feel the curiosity and nervousness of the woman, along with a faint

strain of fear and hostility. It wasn't that she viewed Farrah as a danger, but saw her as a more nebulous kind of threat. It wasn't something Farrah could unravel without knowing the woman and circumstances more.

"They've all seen Uncle Jason's recordings, so they all recognise you," Emi explained, ignoring the room's occupants as she pulled Farrah in the direction of the arch. "Not all of them know you're meant to be dead, though."

For her part, Farrah was arrested by the incongruous obsidian arch in the middle of the room. She had once found an identical one under a lake, the object of a mission her team had been sent on by Emir.

"How can this be here?" she whispered to herself.

"Oh, this?" Emi asked as they reached the arch. "Uncle Jason makes them."

"Farrah?" Erika asked, the first to gather her wits.

"That's my Mum," Emi explained.

"Jason's sister," Farrah said, turning to Erika. "He always spoke warmly of you."

"Erika Asano," she introduced herself. "Jason told us you were dead."

"I was," Farrah said.

"I thought you said we couldn't go in," Emi said to her mother. She was arm-deep in the shadow gate.

"It wasn't working for us," Erika said, reaching out herself. Her hand was stopped dead on reaching the darkness filling the arch.

"That's weird," Emi said. "Farrah, let's go find Uncle Jason."

Emi stepped through the arch, dragging Farrah through behind her. After they vanished, Asya stepped up next to Erika and likewise put her hand up against the darkness. It felt like cool, heavy crystal under her hand, completely unyielding.

"I don't suppose you can tell me what's going on?" Asya asked Erika.

"I think it might be better to watch Jason's recordings from while he was away," Erika said. "I don't think he'd mind you seeing them."

Jason was continuing to explore his new, densely packed garden.

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "I believe that something unexpected is about to happen."

"Oh?"

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- [\[Emi Evans-Asano\] has entered your \[Spirit Vault\].](#)
 - [\[Farrah Hurin\] has entered your \[Spirit Vault\].](#)
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"What?" Jason exclaimed. "That shouldn't be possible."

He was suddenly reminded of the moment he accepted the blessing from the World-Phoenix. At the time, his only concern had been getting to Farrah and he had closed the text wall his interface produced without looking at it. He wondered if there was a message log and his interface promptly supplied one, allowing him to find the discarded message.

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- Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has amalgamated your body and soul into a state that is both physical and spiritual. This state has altered your [Spirit Vault] ability to be a physical space that others can enter.
 - Only those who implicitly trust you will be able to enter your spiritual vault. Anything short of complete trust will prevent them from entering. You may seal the vault against any or all individuals. It is not possible to break into the spiritual vault by anyone without existing access to your soul, such as through a star seed or divinely-granted essence ability.
 - Anyone in your spiritual vault is under your power. They cannot use abilities or affect anything within the vault, including you and each other, with limited exceptions.
 - You and your familiars can affect people within your vault in almost any way, except for violating their souls, although you can attack their souls. They may be protected from your influence through a connection to a foreign element in your souls, such as a star seed or divinely-granted essence ability.
 - You can expel or trap anyone within your spiritual vault, although individuals with a significantly greater soul sense than you may be able to force their way out. Individuals may resist expulsion through a connection to a foreign element in your soul.

“Damn.”

In his astral space, the normal rules of reality didn't apply and he controlled it all. He closed his eyes and the pavilion came into view, with Emi and Farrah looking around in surprise. Farrah looked much improved, the simple change of brushing her hair making a huge difference. She was still haggard but much more like her old self. That was a startling turnaround in just a day and one he didn't put much stock in. He knew that her ordeal wasn't something to simply brush off.

Jason vanished from where he was standing to appear in front of Emi and Farrah.

“Ladies,” he greeted. “I'm a little surprised to see you here.”

“What is this place?” Farrah asked as Emi goggled at Jason's teleportation.

“I've been in dimensional spaces created by essence abilities before,” Farrah said, “and this isn't that. My aura and magic senses aren't even working. Is this some spatial treasure the Order of the Reaper left behind?”

“No,” Jason said. “This is the inside of my soul.”

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Farrah said, then shrugged. “I suppose that’s never stopped you before.”

Jason threw her a grin.

“I see this one dug you out,” Jason said, ruffling Emi’s hair as she crankily pushed his hand away. “How are you doing?”

“Not the best I’ve ever been,” she admitted. “You?”

“I’m not going to complain, with everything you’ve just been through,” Jason said. “Who am I kidding? Of course I am, but that can wait. You have no idea how happy I am to have you here.”

“Can you show us around, Uncle Jason?” Emi asked.

“Sure, although this is quite new to me,” Jason said. “I’ve been experiencing a lot of changes lately. How about we take a look around together?”

Emi slipped her hand into Jason’s and the trio started walking around the garden.

“So, this is what your soul looks like,” Farrah said. “It’s oddly tranquil. I would have expected something a little more erratic.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Jason said. “I’m a beacon of peace and harmony.”

They wandered the garden, Jason and Farrah keeping the topics light due to Emi’s presence. He thought back to the description of why they had accessed his spirit vault. The realisation that they trusted him to that degree filled him with warmth, soothing the raw nerves that had led to him hauling off on his family.

Emi delighted at every new sight, Jason saving the best for last. He finished the garden tour at the fairy grotto, then took them into the bottom floor of the pagoda to look out into the universe.

“It might be more impressive if your boxer shorts weren’t floating past,” Farrah said. Jason made a downward gesture and his inventory items dropped out of sight.

“I really needed this,” he said, squeezing Emi’s hand. “Emi, can you go tell your Mum that I’ve calmed down and I’ll be out in a while?”

“Okay,” she said cheerily, skipping out of the pagoda. The archways for his familiars and the vault doorway were still present in the pavilion. Once she was gone, Jason let his true weariness be revealed on his face.

“Something to eat?” he offered Farrah.

“Is it actual food, or will I be nibbling on bits of your soul?”

“It’s food,” Jason said. “My personal storage space is wrapped up in here.”

They took the elevating platform up to the sitting area and settled into chairs that looked like bamboo but had the soft comfort of cloud furniture. The elevating platform

descended and a tray of sandwiches came sailing up through the hole, settling onto the table in front of them.

"I'm surprised you're out and about," Jason said. "If it were me, I'd be hiding in my room for weeks. I know, because that's what I did when it was me."

"I'm not you," Farrah said. "I want to take control back. Get productive, do some good. That's not so easy in a world you don't know."

"Tell me about it," Jason said. "It was bad enough in your world, only for me to come back and discover I never really knew my own."

"You know more than me," Farrah said. "I'll be relying on you to guide me through it."

"If you're looking for productive, I think I have something. Back in Greenstone, I liked to blow off steam by monster hunting. Vent some frustration and help people at the same time by clearing off the adventure boards. The monsters here appear in proto-astral spaces, which is why no one knows about it. There's some kind of planetwide detection array they use to find and eliminate the monsters before the proto-spaces shoot them out into the world."

"A planet-sized magical array? I'd love a look at that."

"We can probably swing it," Jason said. "I was meant to be meeting with a rep from the local Adventure Society equivalent today. She is out there, but my sister decided to invite my whole family around for a big group talk about magic being real."

"The iron-ranker," Farrah said.

"She can get us into some proto-spaces," Jason said. "I still need to sort out the details, though. My family kind of took over everything and I just lost it and started yelling at them. They wouldn't have understood much and believed even less."

"Let me guess," Farrah said. "You're sinking all this time and energy into getting them caught up on magic, making sure they're safe and understand what's happening."

"Something like that."

"Well, you need to stop," Farrah said. "Just because you came home with a pile of magic powers, that doesn't mean you're suddenly the king of everyone. There's only so far you can be responsible for and to your family. They have to make their own choices and you don't get to tell them what to do."

"My coming back into their lives has caused chaos and brought danger."

"Are you an idiot?" she asked. "Life is dangerous and you can't change that, no matter how much you twist yourself up in knots trying. Do you think you're the first adventurer to bring some weird crap back to hang around their family's necks? Every adventurer that comes up from nothing has some variation on this, and yes, your story has

some surprising turns, but so does everyone else's. You're a little weird, Jason, but you aren't that special."

"So what do I do?" he asked.

"The same thing everyone does. You essence stone your family up, train any of them that are worth a damn and send the rest monster cores every now and then. Beyond that, you have to let them be responsible for themselves or it all goes wrong. If you're too controlling, they get stifled and inevitably someone makes a stupid choice and betrays the family, be it on purpose or inadvertently."

"It's not that simple."

"Yes it is," she said, then poked him in the forehead. "That is where things keep getting complicated. You need to get out of your own way, magic up the family and let them loose to make their own mistakes, while you focus on what you need to do."

"I'm not even sure where to start," Jason said.

"I suggest with how we even ended up here," she said. "We're in the wrong damn universe."