

Chapter 541

Domain

The moment Humphrey appeared in Jason's spirit realm, he lost the protection of Jason's aura. The artificial aura of the beacon wasn't attacking him, but being so close to its source was like his soul being dangled upside down in a raging river full of razor blades. He dropped the beacon, staggering as he pushed his own aura out to resist, but the extremely powerful, gold-rank device was too strong and too close.

He took one unsteady step and then another. He was stumbling, which should have been quick yet it felt like minutes passed between each one as his soul was scoured. Then another aura surged, pushing back the beacon's aura. It was Jason's aura yet somehow also not, coming not from a person but everywhere around him. Exhausted, Humphrey shakily walked across the gravel path of which he found himself and collapsed onto the nearby grass.

He had arrived at the outer reaches of Jason's spirit domain, emerging from an archway in the high, dark wall. A wide gravel path ran alongside the wall, with gardens on the other side of the path. Humphrey had fallen into a grassy strip between a winding path lined with blood-red flowers and a garden bed of black and white flowers. After sprawling out on his back, he stared up at the blue sky until Jason walked over to loom over him.

"I'm alright," Humphrey said.

"I know."

Jason seemed different from normal, which Humphrey had noticed he sometimes was in the strange realm. His usual frivolity was damped down and his presence became more imposing. Humphrey took the offered hand of his stern-faced friend, who pulled him to his feet.

"How long was it before you can in?" Humphrey asked.

"Just a few seconds," Jason said.

"It felt longer. I'm exhausted."

"When your soul is in the wringer, the passage of time gets very hard to track accurately."

"I guess you'd know," Humphrey said. "Not the most pleasant specialty knowledge to have."

"No," Jason agreed.

Unlike in the outside where Jason had strained himself to shield the group, he now showed no trace of effort. The aura still protecting Humphrey came from the realm around

him, yet it was definitely Jason's aura. Or a more powerful version of it, which was an intimidating concept. The pair looked at the beacon, still where Humphrey had dropped it. It was similar to an orrery, with various crystals connected via metal rods. Humphrey dropping it had inflicted no damage, nor had the fall impeded its operation. Humphrey could faintly sense the aura it was producing, thrashing against the aura suppressing it like a frenzied animal in a cage.

"It's powerful," Humphrey said. "Can this place contain it safely?"

"It's powerful on the outside," Jason said. "In here, it's nothing."

Humphrey felt an oppressive power and looked turned to look behind them. In the far-off centre of the realm loomed the ominous dark tower. In the air above the tower was the nebula eye; a monumental replica of the eye of Jason's familiar. As well as Jason's own eyes.

In Jason's otherworldly realm it was hard to judge distance, or perhaps distance was not the same fixed constant it was outside. The tower was unquestionably far away and the eye was directly above it, yet Humphrey was filled with certainty that the eye was somehow much closer. Despite the amorphous nature of it, being an eye-shaped cloud, Humphrey could tell that it was looking directly at the beacon.

An aura pressed down from the eye onto the device, Humphrey feeling only peripheral contact with the eye's projected aura. Like the aura shielding him, it was Jason's aura but also not. This one was even more powerful, being far more vast and mysterious. Observing the aura projected by the eye was like looking into the water from a boat and glimpsing a fraction of a leviathan whose true vastness remained hidden in the depths.

The impact of the eye's aura on that of the beacon was immediate. Like a clockmaker disassembling a timepiece, the eye started taking the aura apart. One of the small outer crystals exploded, throwing out tiny shards. Most aura interactions were invisible, but with the explosion of the crystal, the beacon's aura started spilling into the visible spectrum. White lights started popping like fireworks over the beacon, then blue and orange light appeared as well. This was the aura of the eye rendered visible; a devouring cloud consuming the white lights. The white lights were broken into rainbow colours, as if refracting through a crystal, before vanishing.

More crystals exploded, producing more and more of the white lights, yet the blue and orange cloud had no trouble consuming them all. With every light that was turned into a rainbow before vanishing, the aura of the beacon grew weaker.

"What's going on in there?" Sophie's voice came through Jason's party interface.

"We're handling with the beacon," Jason said. "Stay out there. We'll come out when it's dealt with."

"Voice chat works in here?" Humphrey asked.

"It's something I've been working on," Jason explained as they continued to watch the beacon's aura being devoured. "I've seen a lot of astral spaces, astral proto-spaces and the transformation zones I told you about. Most of them block any form of communication, be that my party interface or even Shade communicating with his own bodies. Some allow it, though, and I've been unravelling the process by which that works. It's less a matter of power and more about understanding, although a certain threshold of power is necessary."

"Are you saying you can use your party interface across dimensional boundaries?"

"Only with my spirit realm," Jason said. "I'm looking to expand the utility going forward but I still have a lot to learn about astral magic."

They continued to watch, Humphrey growing more uneasy at the concept of auras having component pieces. The potential revelations of what that meant for the soul were troubling.

"It's not a real aura," Jason said, despite Humphrey not asking. "False auras, like the motive spirit of a monster or a false aura from devices like this are actually magical projections, not soul projections. The most powerful being in the cosmos couldn't take apart your aura like this unless you were stupid enough to let them into your soul where they could strip-mine it."

As they watched, the larger and more central crystals were exploding. The cloud continued to consume the resulting lights. Finally, the large central crystal erupted into fragmented shards, many of which were flung in the direction of Jason and Humphrey. Humphrey conjured his dragon wings to shield them but the fragments stopped in the air as if they had struck an invisible gelatin wall and become embedded. They drifted back and fell onto the gravel, becoming inert.

Finally, all that remained of the beacon was the brass and silver rods that had connected the now-annihilated crystals, along with shard piles that had once been the crystals. Jason looked at them and the shards and rods all started to melt. Once they were nothing more than liquid pooled on the gravel, they seeped into the ground like water into dry earth.

Jason was looking at the spot the beacon had been with a grim frown.

"Jason, is everything alright?"

Jason looked up absently, distracted from his thoughts.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. No worries, mate. You should be able to contact Liara, now."

Humphrey did just that, quickly briefing the expedition leader. He glossed over the details of the beacon's destruction and focused on the group's postulation that the Purity worshippers were likely after the clockwork kings. Liara thanked Humphrey, directing their group to join the search for the missing adventurers, for which Jason's expansive aura should be helpful.

"We should go and regroup with the others and get moving," Humphrey told Jason. Jason nodded, still looking distracted.

"Are you sure you're alright, Jason?"

"I'm fine."

"It would make sense if destroying that thing exhausted you. We can stop to rest if you need it."

"No," Jason said. "It wasn't much of an effort."

"It did seem easy enough," Humphrey said. "if you don't mind, though, I could use a rest myself. It was only a couple of seconds, but being in that thing's aura felt like much longer."

"Of course."

Jason turned to gesture at a simple park bench that definitely hadn't been there before. He and Humphrey sat, Humphrey looking at his friend with concern. Jason was different in this place. The vast and powerful aura permeating it wasn't Jason's exactly but it also was. His aura power, Hegemon, always felt imposing when evoked; a sense that had only grown as Jason's soul went through change after change.

Humphrey's aura was likewise domineering, but his was the aura of a dragon: the natural ruler of wherever he happened to be standing. Jason's was more like a celestial law. His aura power came from the sin essence and, when projected, made the people within it feel as if Jason himself was the arbiter of right and wrong. The power of his aura essence reflected this, imposing a sin affliction on anyone that attacked Jason or his allies. To act against Jason within his domain was a sin and was punished accordingly. The sin afflictions that his aura power inflicted could not be resisted.

When Jason was just another silver ranker, even with his aura possessing the strength it did, that was one thing. But in this place, Jason felt like a god. Even if the power felt nothing but benevolent to them, it left the team with a sense of unease each time they experienced it. The comparison to divinity was one Humphrey had subconsciously avoided, despite the obviousness of it, but it was no longer a comparison he could avoid. The beacon had been a gold-rank artefact, and not a lesser one. Jason's power in this realm was extremely abnormal.

Humphrey looked around at the spirit realm before his gaze settled on the giant eye above the tower. It looked no different than it had before, yet Humphrey felt certain it was no longer looking in their direction. Unlike Clive, Humphrey had never discussed with Jason the nature of the spirit realm after realising it was no ordinary dimensional realm power.

“Jason, that thing was far too powerful to just destroy safely.”

“Yes.”

“But not here.”

“No.”

“What is this place?”

Jason looked at Humphrey for a long moment, then nodded to himself.

“It’s a combination of factors,” Jason said. “It started out as a power evolution for my storage space that created a realm where only myself and my familiars could enter. Then, after my body and soul went from dual-natured to a gestalt, the now physical nature of my soul changed it. Other people could enter. Under certain conditions.”

“Conditions?”

“Other people’s souls will instinctively recognise the power I will have over them here. Unless they trust me completely, they’ll be boxed out. Even if they want to risk it, their souls won’t let them. They can’t be forced in, even by themselves, any more than they can be into a hostile portal.”

Humphrey’s eyes went wide as an important puzzle piece fell into place.

“That was why you were so emotional after we came here,” he said. “And why you waited so long to show us. We’d been wondering.”

Jason nodded.

“There’s another factor,” Jason said. “The ability evolved a second time.”

“Like mine.”

“Not exactly,” Jason said. “You came by your second evolution honestly. Mine was triggered by significant external forces.”

“What kind of forces?”

“I was more or less using my soul as a lever to force a gap in reality shut. I was in a place where reality was so in flux that it altered me to make that possible. It was a side effect that let me do... certain things.”

“You can’t tell me?”

“Probably best if I didn’t. The practical effects are that it increases my power and presence in places that are connected to my soul.”

"Like the cloud house," Humphrey realised. "It's why it always feels like you're there."

"Yes," Jason said, then a mischievous smile teased at his lips. "I've done my best to tamp that down while you and Sophie are sharing private moments."

Humphrey went stiff but was happy at the same time to see Jason's face return from sombre to its normal impishness.

"So, this place is connected to your soul?" Humphrey asked. "Is that how you're so powerful here?"

"This is my soul," Jason said. "I am all-powerful, here. Since I gained my spirit domain power – which I'll ask you not to talk about outside of here or the cloud house – I don't think anything could harm me here."

"This is your soul? We're inside your soul right now?"

"Yes."

Humphrey felt like he should be incredulous but it instead made complete sense. Suddenly the strange feeling he had every time he came into Jason's spirit realm made much more sense.

"You said you're all-powerful, here? That's how you destroyed the beacon?"

"When others first became able to enter, I didn't have the spirit domain power and was only bronze rank. Dawn speculated that a diamond-ranker might be able to resist my influence, here. Now, I don't think anything can. I'm pretty sure that if anyone tries to implant a star seed in me now, I can just let them and annihilate the thing once it's here. Maybe even wipe the owner's control and absorb it for my own use."

"The way you did with that bridge and door you told us about."

"Yes. I tried to do something similar with this beacon but it was too weak and crude to endure the process. It didn't maintain enough integrity to be absorbed as it broke down."

"So, now you have leftover bits of beacon in your soul? Is there a magic mop for that?"

Jason burst into a laugh.

"You don't need to worry about the residue affecting me. This place will digest it like food to strengthen my spiritual defences."

Humphrey looked at his friend, remembering the carefree man he met in a waiting room of the Greenstone Adventure Society. Jason's smile was still there but there was a heaviness to it. The smile was genuine but Humphrey didn't think Jason would ever have the lightness of the past.

"We all take on burdens as we go through life," Jason said. "It gets heavier for everyone."

“Can you read my mind, here?” Humphrey asked.

“No,” Jason said. “I can read your face. You should avoid playing cards for money.”

“That’s not what Belinda told me.”

“She took all your money?”

“Sophie made her stop. Eventually.”

“Are you two coming back out?” Sophie asked through voice chat. “Didn’t Liara tell us to get moving? I’m starting to get a little jealous.”

Humphrey frowned at Jason in confusion. “Jealous?”

“She sees the chemistry,” Jason said, pointing back and forth between himself and Humphrey. “I’d totally ship us.”

“What does a boat have to do with it?”

Jason shook his head.

“Oh, Hump.”

“Don’t call me Hump.”