

## Chapter 590

### A King Needs a Throne

Rufus had instilled in Jason an appreciation for the fundamentals of training. Since those first days in Greenstone, Jason's life had been storms of activity, followed by downtime for various reasons. Whether it was waiting for the Reaper trials to begin or staying with family in a world that ostensibly lacked magic and monsters, there were periods when Jason was not constantly caught up in the fight.

It was in those times that Jason turned back to the training fundamentals in earnest. While he was in recovery, Jason's body recovered faster than his ability to use his magical abilities in earnest, so he took that time again. He started with meditation, as even with a ravaged body it was something he could easily do. It even seemed to accelerate his recovery a little, to the point that Carlos noticed the difference and strongly encouraged him to continue.

Once his physical state started to improve, Jason turned back to Rufus for guidance once more. With the monster surge winding down, Rufus had moved away from taking contracts in rapid succession and started working with Jason again. The focus of their training had been one of Jason's critical gains during his time away, outside of the growth in power that came from his rank and his essence abilities. It was something that came from the foundations that Rufus had laid with Jason's original training and the harrow experiences Jason had on Earth.

Isolated in a transformation zone, fighting what felt like ceaseless battles, Jason had managed to enter a state known as a combat trance. It was something he had managed to re-enter sporadically since, where all his capabilities were maximised to the limits of his powers and skills. On the flattened roof of the pagoda, Rufus and Jason stood facing one another as Rufus instructed Jason.

"The combat trance is a difficult state to enter. It is two oppositional states of mind, melded into one. It is simultaneously the empty-mind state of meditation, along with the conscious-mind state that can think tactically and strategically."

Jason nodded.

"I've felt that contradiction," he said. "It's why I still struggle to enter that state."

"But you have done it, on far more than one occasion."

"Yes."

"Tell me about those times," Rufus said. "What do they have in common?"

"It was always intense situations where I was vastly outnumbered and pushed to the limits. Sometimes I chose the circumstances because I knew it would push my limits. Sometimes the circumstances chose me."

Rufus nodded.

"What you're describing is very typical. The meditation techniques I taught you, especially the Dance of the Sword Fairy, are designed to prime you for this. But that is only the preparation, and the important part is what comes next. You have to do the work. You have to drive yourself. Only once you have pushed yourself to the limits of your potential can you take that extra step."

"And that's where the pressure comes in."

"Yes. You have to reach a position where you don't have any more to give, then be in a position where you need to give more anyway. Where the only way forward is for your mind to strip away everything you don't need and become completely focused on what you do. To unconsciously act in a conscious manner. Instinctual deliberation."

"We have this concept in my world," Jason said. "We call it effortless action, and it's famously difficult to accomplish. I can only think of one person who had truly accomplished it, and he's a legendary figure, rather than a historical one. I'm told that it's almost impossible until your body has started moving away from the brain as the centre of the mind, which is bronze-rank at least."

"That's the generally accepted wisdom," Rufus said.

"When did you first achieve a combat trance?"

"When I was eighteen."

"Didn't you get essences when you were nineteen?"

"I don't want to talk about that. Tell me about this legendary figure of yours."

"No worries. There's a place called the Hundred Acre Wood..."

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The sky was painted in gorgeous sunset colours as Carlos entered the pagoda and he paused, narrowing his eyes.

"It feels different here today. Calmer."

"Mr Asano has spent much of the day in meditation," Shade said, guiding Carlos across the atrium. "He has been achieving better results as he recovers."

"His mood affects the whole building? It's genuinely an extension of his soul, isn't it? And does his soul being a physical manifestation increase the effect?"

“I do hope that you are just curious and not gathering information, Priest Quilido. You have more insight than most into what Mr Asano’s soul is capable of, which means you could prove a danger to him. Also, that you understand the danger he could be to you.”

“I’m not a threat to him, Shade. I’m an ally.”

“You would not be the first ally to come for him, Priest Quilido. They always thought that being higher rank was enough, too.”

“You’re very protective of him,” Carlos said as their platform started ascending.

“Added to his propensity for coming back from the dead, has Jason found the favour of the Reaper?”

“Mr Asano courts no favour. He is true to himself, for good or – more often than I would like – ill.”

The platform carried them all the way to the roof, which had been flattened out compared to the day before. Jason was standing at the edge, looking out not at the sea but inland, over the island. He wasn’t wearing his normal outfits of either smartly tailored tropical-weather suits or garish floral shirts and shorts. He was in simple and loose white clothes; training gear, Carlos guessed, given the two wooden swords resting on the roof beside him.

Jason didn’t turn around at their approach. Shade vanished into Jason’s shadow as Carlos stepped up beside him. He looked out over the island, dotted with little villages. The pagoda was the tallest residence, but the largest was the sprawling royal compound that appeared blurry, as if under a heat-haze shimmer. Carlos knew it was not some meteorological oddity but an observation filter, part of the compound’s protections.

“Rimaros is called the ABC Islands in the other world,” Jason said, not turning his gaze from the vista. “This island is called Aruba, over there. I’ve never been to that world’s version, but I suspect it’s very different, from what I know of it.”

“You said the other world,” Carlos pointed out. “You didn’t say it was your world.”

“Home isn’t where you’re from, Carlos; it’s where you go back to.”

“I suppose it is.”

“You’ve had time with my test results. Am I fully recovered?”

Carlos smiled.

“Yesterday, you were asking me. Today it sounds like you know.”

Jason nodded.

“Thank you, Carlos. I know things were a little rough between us, but I’m glad we moved past that.”

“Your familiar seems less forgiving.”

“Shade is his own person. And it’s easier to forgive someone who has wronged you than someone who has wronged the people you cherish. In my experience, anyway.”

Shadows danced around Jason, draping themselves over and around him, but it was different to how his cloak had appeared in the past. It was deeper, like an aperture into a bottomless abyss. That changed as stars and nebulas appeared within, not as aspects of the cloak but as if viewed from a great distance. It seemed as if Jason had wrapped himself in a portal to some distant, starry realm. Carlos moved around Jason and his perspective shifted, as Jason’s cloak truly was a window into another place.

"Your cloak didn't use to look like that."

"No," Jason said. "looks pretty good though, right?"

"It's... uncomfortable to look at. Uncanny, like you're wearing a hole in reality."

"You know that powers can change appearance, based on their wielders."

"Yes, but those changes say a lot about the people who have them," Carlos said.

"Aren't you worried about what this says about you?"

The cloak dissolved and Jason stepped closer to Carlos.

"And what does it say about me, Carlos?"

"That maybe the people who worrying about you should be."

Jason's smile was that of a snake who found a nest of turtle eggs.

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Jason sent an unnerved Carlos away, the pagoda’s sloped roof being restored as they descended from it on an elevating platform. After seeing Carlos out, Jason opened a portal for the first time in months, from the atrium to his personal suite on the top floor.

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- **The origin and destination for your portal ability are both within your territory. [Astral Gate] has reset the cooldown of your portal ability.**
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“Huh.”

Jason stepped through the portal, feeling the familiar tingle as he touched on the dimensional boundaries of reality.

“Doesn’t feel any different.”

Jason opened another portal, different to any he had before. Cloud substance rose from the floor, taking the form of an arch before shifting from cloud-stuff to a milky white crystal in which blue and orange light was swirling like liquid in a lava lamp. A curtain of Transcendent light in gold, silver and blue started shimmering in the arch.

Jason's normal portals were an essence ability and allowed him to rapidly move between locations. He had also gained the ability to open a portal to his soul space which, at first, only he and his familiars had been able to enter. But after his soul took on physical properties, others could go in, with a significant restriction. The power he held over anyone who entered his soul space was immense, and their own souls would balk at entry. As such, only those with a profound trust in his good intentions could enter.

The portal Jason had just opened was different. Something about channelling authority through himself, infusing it into the cloud house or probably both, had brought about a fundamental change. He knew that this new arch would admit anyone. He did not know why, or what had changed to allow it, but he could feel it in his soul. Were the people within his soul space somehow protected from him, making it safe for them? Why would the change to his ability do something that seemingly made it weaker?

Jason was contemplating the portal when Dawn alighted on his balcony, her fiery wings vanishing as she walked inside.

"Your ability didn't get weaker," she told him.

"Are you reading my mind?"

"Your spirit realm has changed."

"I'm calling it a soul space now."

"It doesn't matter what you call it. It matters what it is."

"And what is it?"

"You're aware that you share certain things in common with the messengers."

"I am."

"Have you ever wondered who they are the messengers of?"

"I'm wondering now. Is there some kind of super messenger that's going to invade?"

"They won't invade. Not in person. That's what the messengers are for."

"And what's the message?"

"Kneel."

"Oh, that's tremendous. So, who are these people?"

"Astral kings."

"I think I see where this is going. A king needs a throne."

"Yes, they do," Dawn said. "This is why I was concerned about one coming into your possession. Then you went and used that authority. You either fed it into your soul space and it bled out into your cloud flask, or the other way around. Do you even know which it was?"

"I think it started in the flask, but I can't be sure. I wasn't trying to do anything; I was just angry. I'm still not certain what happened."

"It doesn't matter, now. Between the astral throne and the authority, you've established an astral domain that is, I imagine, currently very small. You are an astral king with a very diminutive kingdom."

"You're saying I've bought real estate in the astral?"

"I'm saying you *are* real estate in the astral. You are your domain, Jason."

"I'm not entirely clear on how this works. For one thing, I think we're reaching the limits of using geography as a metaphor for how territory works in the astral. I mean, it's inside me, and it's a real space but it's also in the astral and not a real space. And how is it different from the way it was before? People could already come in."

"Your soul space was still more soul than space. An astral domain is a place. A place that you can shape and control, but as real as the world you were born in."

"If it's an actual place, now can someone break-in?"

"No. It's your soul."

"Can they mess me up if I let them in?"

"No. More than ever, you rule that place. It's even safe for extremely powerful beings to enter, now. Safe for you, anyway. Not so much for them."

"But no gatekeeping with trust anymore?"

"You were signalling an unconscious warning to other souls that to enter was dangerous. That was why the requirement to enter was their trust in you, not yours in them."

"But now, no warning?"

"You are operating on a different scale, now. Volcanos don't warn you not to walk into them. You're expected to figure that out by yourself."

"I'd say blanketing the sky in smoke and ash is a pretty big warning."

"As is blanketing the sky with your soul projection."

"I was unconscious for that, remember. It was really that big?"

"Jason, there is a reason every powerful person in this kingdom is paying very close attention to you right now. What you've been doing, both in public displays and to yourself, are not things of this world. These are things that belong to the cosmos, and the diamond rankers who have travelled it will recognise this."

"Is that why Soramir has always been so nice to me?"

"He has walked the cosmic pathways. He sensed the things in you from the start and recognised, on some level, that you were not a junior but a peer."

“Is that good or bad?”

“It is, perhaps, necessary, given the events in which you are inevitably caught up in.”

Jason sighed.

“There’s more I need to know, isn’t there? Yet again, my soul is doing things I don’t understand. I mean, I know it; it’s my soul. I just don’t understand. It’s like memorising a science textbook without understanding what it means.”

“I will help you, as much as I can. But now you have recovered and I cannot keep putting off my departure. It will be a few more days, at most.”

Jason looked at the archway.

“You could never go in before, could you?”

“No. It would have been dangerous for both of us.”

“But you said extremely powerful beings could go in now.”

“I did.”

He held out his hand for her to take.

“Shall we?”