

Chapter 1027

A Place Within the Cosmic Order

Jason's true form, his actual body and soul, was his astral kingdom. A pocket universe the size of a solar system, it had a sun and several planets whose habitability varied by occupant. The vampire prison planet had a perpetual atmospheric gloom that filtered the sunlight, excising the magic that sapped their powers and warped their minds. By contrast, the planet for the messenger prisoners of war had wide open skies, a place of soaring mountains and floating sky islands.

For the main planet, Jason had sought to create a paradise in every climate. Winter wonderlands at the poles. Archipelagos set in cerulean tropical waters. There were currently two cities on the planet, one occupied and one not. New Water was an oasis containing the former population of Boko, a city of scholars and poets from Pallimustus. Jason had given them a new home after an attempt on his life had led to the city's destruction.

The sprawling city of Arbour was in a temperate goldilocks zone, with seasons that shifted noticeably through the year without ever reaching extremes. The nearby mountains were capped with snow in the cool, pleasant winters. The lake to the north was perfect for quenching the summer heat. Spring was vibrant and filled with new life while the pleasant breezes of autumn stirred golden, falling leaves.

Arbour was dominated by the towering trees for which it and the spirit it embodied were named. Its terrain was vast, primal and grand. A mountain range bordered it to the west, shielding it from the sharp winds blowing in off the ocean. The valleys and hills were rich with life, plants and animals both. A majestic waterfall fed a river running through a tree-lined gorge containing manor homes, waiting for occupants. At the heart of the city, trees towered like skyscrapers. Even so, one central tree reached heights beyond even them, yet the light passed through its branches to reach the canopy below.

A literal living city, buildings grew right out of the tree trunks, linked by a network of skywalks that ranged from broad and rigid thoroughfares to swaying rope bridges. Other buildings rose from the earth, made of stone and rammed earth.

Beneath those buildings, tunnels wound through the roots of the trees, lit with phosphorescent moss. A system of passages moving through earth and stone, it rivalled the streets above. Those streets meandered under the tree canopy, dappled light dancing across hard-packed ground.

The city currently had only one permanent resident, and that was Farrah. Uncertain of what would happen to his astral kingdom when he was sealed away from it, Jason placed her in charge of holding things together. After Jason, she had the strongest connection to it, alongside the living tree city. Having accepted that responsibility, however, she found herself at a loss. Sealed away from the entire cosmos, she was unsure how to spend her days. She found herself wandering along a street that was more like a wide forest path.

Her only companion was the spirit of the city itself. With its own soul that had taken root inside of Jason's, the city could reshape and regrow itself at will. It had done so repeatedly over the years, despite a lack of occupants. Sometimes it was more forest than city, while at others times, more constructed and urban. The ability to remake itself would be useful for the population, once it had one. For now, the city was filled with what looked like seed pods. Growing from trees or pushing up out of the ground, they ranged from the size of a refrigerator to the size of a school bus.

As Farrah wandered, feeling something like a loose end, she did not do so alone. While the city was the true body of Arbour, it could, like Jason, create avatars that were more useful for dealing with people. Often that avatar took the shape of an elf with earthy skin and green hair, but today Arbour was feeling more primal. Farrah's walking companion was a humanoid figure made of chunks of wood and loose branches, bound together with vines.

Farrah looked up at an especially large pod, dangling from a tree branch that looked thick, but perhaps not strong enough to hold the pod's weight.

"Is that thing about to fall?" she asked.

"It will remain as it is, until it is ready," the vine-wood avatar said, its voice raspy and deep.

"Which will be when?"

"I am the vessel through which these pods grow, but it is not my power that feeds them. My roots lie within Jason Asano's soil, and as he grows, my potential awakens."

"I've noticed a lot more pods lately. Does that mean he's getting stronger?"

"It is not a matter of strength. There is what amounts to limitless power here. The trick is refining that power, an area in which Asano grows as his mortal aspect grows closer to that which is already transcendent. As my roots lie within his soil, so does my potential grow in kind."

"So, 'yes' is what you're saying."

Farrah wasn't sure how she read amusement on the unmoving wooden face as it turned just enough to give her side eye.

"I am," Arbour said.

"How long until they hatch? Is that the right word?"

"The pods will not open until the power creating them undertakes a fundamental advancement in how it is refined. Only then will I be able to make them fully ready."

"Meaning that Jason needs to reach diamond rank."

"Yes. How much do you know about the transition to diamond-rank?"

"Not a lot. I get the impression that you know more."

"While I have followed a rather twisted path, my origins are found in the birthing trees of the messengers. The nature of such trees is to produce creatures with an innate ability to achieve transcendence. To become astral kings. Because I retain much of that nature, I have an intrinsic understanding of power thresholds."

"Does that mean you can help me reach diamond-rank?"

"Jason Asano has asked me to do so. You have long since passed the threshold of gold-rank, so you understand the change in advancement from traditional training and combat to self-exploration and understanding. From being shaped by the world to shaping yourself. From the outer progress to the inner."

"Uh, yeah, I guess."

"The oddity of achieving diamond-rank is that the key is looking beyond the rank itself, to the greater cosmos."

"To transcendent rank?"

"Not quite. For gold-rank you must turn your gaze inward. For diamond, you must turn it outward again. Not just to the immediate future, but the ultimate future. Transcendent is the threshold between mortal and immortal, but diamond is the first step on that path. To achieve it you must look beyond it. The beginning of the infinite road is to look at infinity itself."

"So, gold-rank is an ending and diamond is a new start?"

"Yes and no. Gold-rank is the foundation. The completion of a road to build a self that is sufficiently robust to endure what comes next."

"Which is?"

"Taking a place within the scope of all that is. Positioning yourself in the wider cosmos. Crossing the threshold into diamond is a tentative, tiny step, but an immensely profound one, for it is a step towards the infinite."

"And how do I take that step?"

"It begins with a glimpse into the fullness of the cosmos. You cannot comprehend the true scope, as that would destroy your mind, but it is possible to gain some sense of it. An inkling of what it is you are stepping into."

"How do I get this glimpse?"

"In that, you are fortunate. This realm has places from which the broader cosmos can be looked upon. When you take that look, your reaction is what will determine the next step. For some, they feel overwhelmed. A glimpse of infinite vastness fills them with terror. For others, they feel irrelevant. So small that even their sense of self becomes meaningless. To move forward, one must reach equanimity. That does not mean peace, but instead taking a place within the cosmic order."

"You're saying that I have to find my place in the cosmos."

"Not find. Make. There is no place set out for you, awaiting your arrival. You must forge it, with your own hands."

"It feels like Jason has had a place set out for him."

"His path is both easier and harder than the norm. Places have been set out for him, but if he simply takes them, he will be an empty shell. A puppet exploited by those who would use him. Have been using him already. He knows this now, and he is not happy about it."

Farrah chuckled.

"No, he is not."

"Jason can use what has been provided, but he must break it down and rebuilt it, making it his own. If one does not climb for themselves, they will never reach the top."

"I don't think that will be a problem," Farrah said with casual confidence. "From the beginning he's been taking stuff the great astral beings give him and breaking it."

She gestured at the space around them.

"That's how we got this place. It's why you're here, when the rest of us wanted to kill you in that transformation zone."

"I have not known him for as long as you, but we are both connected to his soul in our own ways. Your role is to challenge him. Defy him. To be his boundary when no one else can hold him back. Mine is to enrich this place, and through it, myself. We know him in different ways, but I believe we both understand that disruption and defiance sit at the core of his nature."

"No kidding."

"That nature serves him well."

Arbour gestured at the pods growing from the trees and earth.

"This sudden burst of growth represents fresh progress along his path. He has made a decision, a vow that will echo through the rest of his existence."

Farrah let out a groan.

"What did he do?"

"He has declared his intention to slay a god outright. Not defeat, not sanction. Kill."

Farrah hung her head.

"Of course he has. He doesn't even care that it's impossible, does he?"

"He does not, and his determination has resonated through his entire being. His pursuit of this quest will define who he is within himself, as well as within the cosmos. If you and his other companions wish to keep up, you will need guidance."

Clive, Belinda and Sophie shoved against each other to peer out of a small cottage window. Outside, in the garden, was Helsveth, their host. After taking the dimension ship across the astral, they had entered some universe and been immediately approached by what Helsveth had told them was a space vessel. Not a dimension ship but a craft designed to move between planets and galaxies within a single universe.

The ship looked something like a fat metal spider. A metal tunnel had emerged from its side to reach the bubble around the garden cottage, and two people walked out of it to enter the garden. They wore dark blue uniforms trimmed with gold, and were both celestines.

"That ship looks like it's from the movies where the big egg shoots planets," Sophie said.

"That's how you describe one of the major cultural touchstones of Earth?" Belinda asked. "I can't believe you don't know the Trek War movies better."

"That doesn't sound right," Clive said.

"Hush, you," Belinda told him.

"The magitech driving that thing must be incredible," Clive said. "Travis would love it."

He frowned thinking of the people who had returned to Pallimustus. Sophie glanced at him and slung an arm around his shoulder.

"You could have brought Lorelei with us," she told him.

"No. She wanted to manage things back at the Magic Research Institute. We've been away for a decade, and we don't want corruption seeping in the way it has with the Magic Society. Especially when things are going to be so contentious on Pallimustus. Diamond-rankers and gods in conflict. For all we know, Knowledge has been using our absence to exploit the Institute against Earth somehow."

"Like how?" Belinda asked.

"Well, the Institute is the foremost arena for magitech research on Pallimustus, largely because of Travis Noble. It wouldn't be hard for the goddess of Knowledge to convince a bunch of magic researchers to work on weapons that she might be preparing to use on Earth as we speak."

"You think Lorelei will be okay?" Sophie asked.

"She'll be fine," Clive said. "If she can put up with all your jokes about my imaginary wife, she can put up with one rogue goddess with other things to worry about."

"Oh, Clive," Belinda said, patting him on the back. "You're not imagining Lorelei, we've all seen her. Let's just hope your last wife hasn't."

Clive let out a low grumble.

"Is it too late to switch sides and join the Church of Knowledge?"

"Hey, they're leaving," Sophie said. The trio watched the two visitors return to their ship, the surface of the dome rippling like pond water as they passed through. Helsveth turned to stare at the window and the three observers scrambled away from it, doing a poor job of looking nonchalant as Helsveth came inside.

"Are you finally going to tell us where we're going?" Belinda asked.

Helsveth was a striking draconian woman with scales of gold and red. She loomed over Belinda. Literally looking down her nose at the smaller woman.

"We have just passed the dimensional security checks for entry into the Star Cage Galactic Imperium."

"That doesn't sound ominous at all," Neil said as he and the rest of the group joined them in the main room of the cottage.

"I suggest you go out into the garden," Helsveth told them. "For people who have lived their lives cloistered away in backwards universes, it should be quite a sight."

"Rude," Belinda said, but was the first one out the door.

Team Biscuit gathered in the garden, lined up as they looked out through the bubble. Helsveth followed and stood behind them.

"It just looks like regular space," Neil said. "All the stars are pretty, don't get me wrong, but nothing we haven't seen before. It's basically a fancy night sky."

Helsveth held up her hand and made a turning gesture. The entire dimension ship pivoted, bring a blazing sight into view. The bubble surrounding the ship darkened to dim the light from what turned out to be a startling close sun. Despite the proximity, they felt none of the heat. Even with the dome made dark, the strength of the sun's light allowed

them to see a strange construction that wrapped all the way around the star. Spreading out like spokes on a wheel, something had been built around the vast stellar object.

Clive dashed up to the bubble, almost to the point of shoving his face through it. He stared at the humungous construction like a little boy at his first parade.

"Is that a city built around the sun?"

"There are many like this within the empire," Helsveth explained. "It is from these that the Star Cage Galactic Imperium takes its name."

"This is amazing. Are they drawing energy from the sun to power the city?"

"Yes," Helsveth said. "As you might imagine, sun gods are even more important figures than normal within the imperium."

"Let's maybe not go getting involved with any more gods," Lindy said.

"Good idea," Humphrey said. "This is all very impressive, but why are we here?"

"You don't sound very impressed," Sophie said. "That's a city wrapped around a sun. There's probably more people down there than on our entire world. If not that, what does it take to impress you?"

"You impress me."

She grinned and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Good answer. You're getting better at this."

"There are good incentives," he replied, not trying too hard to mask a smug grin.

As she pulled him in for a kiss, Neil rolled his eyes and Rufus let out a sigh.

"I miss Hanson," Rufus muttered.

"The band?" Neil asked.

"No, my boyfriend."

"Oh, the TV doctor."

"He's a real doctor."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

"I'm pretty sure Jason said he was on TV. Something about playing a character named Dr Handsome Doctor?"

"I can't believe that, out of all the times Jason died," Rufus said, "none of us were responsible for any of them."

"You'd think we'd have gotten one in," Neil said, nodding his agreement.

Helsveth watched the group in mild disbelief.

"I've brought you to a place that, even on a cosmic scale, is one of the most impressive sights that can ever be seen, and you're all standing around talking about nonsense."

"Welcome to Team Biscuit," said a caterpillar munching on one of the garden's leaves. It turned into a robin and flew over to land on Clive's head.

The team gathered near the edge of the garden to look out at the city together. It was a magnificent thing of dark blue glass and white ceramic. The space above it was filled with vessels, from large ships like the one that had approached them to smaller flying cars.

"Handling all the heat must be quite a task," Clive observed.

"I bet they draw it all in, shielding the city and using it to power stuff," Belinda said.

"Look at those pillars sticking right out of the sun's surface. I bet they're some kind of astral accumulator, converting power from the sun to draw and refine magic out of the astral. An advance version of the storm accumulators in the Storm kingdom."

"This is quite a view," Estella said and Belinda slipped an arm around her waist.

"Aren't you glad you decided to sign on with us?" Belinda asked.

"There are perks," Stella conceded.

"I still don't know why we're here," Humphrey said. "Is this where the goddess sent Jason?"

"No," Helsveth said. "Jason is, or soon will be, cut off from almost everyone who could help him. This is where you become strong enough to stand with him once he's free."

"A training ground?" Rufus asked. "Why here?"

"Because this is where your trainer lives," Helsveth told him, gesturing to a point out beyond the bubble.

The team's gaze followed where she was pointing and spotted a small, fiery shape. Hard to spot against the backdrop of the burning sun, as it drew closer they could better make out its shape. It was a spider made of fire, with a pair of flaming wings on its back.

As it neared the dome of the dimension ship, the spider transformed into a woman with pale skin, a dark yellow sun dress and blazing fire rising up from her head in place of hair. She floated through the bubble as the team stepped back to make room. As her sandalled feet alighted on the ground, the fire turned into hair and spilled down around her, reaching down to her waist.

"It's good to see you all again," Dawn told them. "Welcome to my home."