

## Chapter 1032

### I Need to Conquer This planet

Emperor Consort Orbis placed a gentle hand on his wife's arm.

"Perhaps we should maintain at least a little formality as we get to know one another. People can find a lack of ceremony when meeting royalty to be unsettling, even more intimidating than encountering them in more formal settings."

"Nah, we're good," Belinda said. "We know this guy. I'm not going to get into it, but he makes the whole ceremonial thing hard."

"He's a bad influence," Neil added.

"It has led to many of our encounters with those in power to be more informal than would otherwise be the case," Humphrey said. "His defiance in the face of kings, diamond-rankers, gods, and great astral beings has been a consistent source of difficulty, to the point that our perspective on such encounters has become rather unconventional."

"Meaning yes, he's a very bad influence," Sophie said.

"To be clear," Estella said, nervously raising her hand, "that doesn't really include me. I'm happy to be very respectful and intimidated."

"That must be some friend," Empress Lumen said. "I don't suppose this is your young man they're talking about, Daughter?"

"How did you... he's a young man, not *my* young man."

"Told you," Belinda quietly said to Neil, who grumpily pulled out a gold spirit coin to hand over.

The empress and her husband shared a delighted parental glance.

"Helsveth," Orbis said. "What is your opinion on this?"

"It is not my place to second-guess the hierophant, Your Majesty."

"At least someone has some decorum," Dawn muttered. "Mother, Father, there is something that I have been keeping from you. Given my position under the World-Phoenix, and yours as the rulers of the Imperium, it behoved me to maintain certain confidences. Now that you have taken in this group, the time has come to share the nature of an affiliation they and I share."

"We can talk all about it over dinner," Lumen told them. "We have a small meal put together upstairs, so let's all come along. You will be joining us, won't you Helly?"

"There are duties as First Sister that I must attend to, Empress."

The Empress' smile didn't change, yet it somehow caused the temperature around Helsveth to precipitously drop.

"You will be joining us, won't you, Helly?"

"I would be delighted, Empress."

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"Is this castle a dimensional space?" Jason asked as he looked around like a tourist. "How did those giants fit in here? And I did not see a mammoth pen."

The restored castle held little resemblance to the decrepit version of itself it had been while corrupted. At a glance it looked like a castle town, centred around a large keep, but inside it was more akin to a palace. As large as it was, however, it did not have the room to hold all the undead who had poured out of it. Jason and his familiars were being shown around by the four people who had approached them after being released from undeath.

"Don't know what happened with the palace," said Baloc, the massive orc. With his broad shoulders and handsome features, Jason had to be careful about not calling him Green Humphrey.

"I was somewhere else, then I was here," Baloc continued. "Didn't think about it. Didn't think about anything."

"You don't think when you're a corrupted undead soul," said Lalia. She was the scaled techno-knight, from a species called the Varen. "Thank you again for releasing us from that awful condition. As for the palace and how many emerged from it, the rules of reality we knew from life mostly apply in this realm, but not always."

"Like your astral space, Mr Asano," Shade explained, "this space is not a normal physical reality. The rules that govern it are mutable. Perhaps your aura will be able to make use of that."

Jason pulled up the description of his aura power's new ability to look at it again.

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#### Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Current rank: Diamond 0 (00%).
  - Effect (diamond): Manipulate fundamental physical and magical laws within the area of your aura. Cannot affect the areas within spiritual domains or unsuppressed hostile auras.
  - [Addendum]: As possessor of a spiritual domain, you may express its power through your aura. The strength of that expression is determined by the strength of the aura and advancement of this ability.
  - [Error]: Prime avatar is sealed from source of spiritual power. Prime avatar may not express power of spiritual domain until access to source is restored.
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He frowned, just as he had every time he looked it over. He'd been hoping that his aura reaching diamond-rank would have compensated for how diminished it had become from being sealed. While there had been a boost in strength, it was far from what he was used to. He was also unsure about the power itself. Changing fundamental laws sounded good on paper, but he could sense the power within himself. The effects he could muster, at least for the moment, were negligible. Until his power returned in full, his aura was the ability most impacted by what Umber had done to him.

"You're looking at that thing again, aren't you?" asked Aeora, whose species did turn out to be called wind fairies.

"Yeah, sorry," Jason said.

Of the four people Jason had met after purging their undead status, Aeora was the only one who had not been an essence user in life, relying on inherent magic for her gold-rank power.

The System, allowing them to quantify their powers more readily, had become a source of fascination since Jason introduced them to it. They had been twisted undead when it had first come into place, so it was new to them all. Aeora was feeling left out, her native magic not being connected to the System.

They resumed the tour of the castle. As they walked, the group had been sharing information with Jason in gratitude for their liberation. They had little to offer about the details of how their afterlife worked, with Shade knowing more than they did in many instances. What they could offer was basic information that Jason would need as he navigated the realm.

"When we aren't corrupted, we are much as we were in life" explained Yujin, the human member of the four. "We have the same rank, the same powers. Most are essence users, or those with native magic, like Aeora. There are some who are different, though, using magic in ways I never encountered in life. Employing essence for magic without absorbing them, or magic without essences at all."

"I've heard of this," Jason said, "but never run into it myself. Of course, I wasn't exactly a cosmopolitan citizen of the cosmos, so that's no surprise."

"Few are," Lalia said. "Most civilisations rise and fall without the people in them ever leaving their planet, let alone their universe."

"Lalia is from the most advanced society of all of us," Yujin said.

"Probably long gone now," Lalia said. "If we have been in this compromised state for as long as you say, I doubt even a galactic civilisation would have endured. And if it has, I doubt I would recognise what it has become."

She bowed her head, letting out a sigh before continuing.

"It troubles me, what has happened here. This place was meant to be a paradise where I could live out eternity in adventure, battle and the hunt. After what has transpired, I find my thoughts drifting to what I had in life. It was not something I considered before, in all the time I have existed here."

"How long is that, if I may ask?" Jason said.

Lalia frowned, as if reaching for a memory just out of her grasp.

"Time and its perception are not as they are in normal reality here, Mr Asano," Shade said. "There is a reason that Raythe is wary of this place going awry. That abnormal time serves as a psychological buffer against the challenges of existing through eternity."

"Does that mean it operates by fey circle rules? I could get out of here only to find out that a thousand years have passed on Earth?"

"No," Shade said. "In fact, I believe that you are the source of Miss Lalia's troubles. Your ability to stabilise realities has normalised the time here. Without the natural time shift altering their perceptions, their minds are turning to more mortal concerns."

"You mean I'm hurting them just by being here?"

"This is not a place for the living, Mr Asano. A mortal would have been affected by it, but you are a cosmic entity who shapes reality around yourself. The impact in this case, is on this afterlife."

"Meaning that I need to fix this place and get out as soon as I can. So, the original plan."

"Just so," Shade agreed.

They continued their way through the castle.

"I don't know what we're going to do," Aeora said. "Many of us were drawn here from elsewhere, apparently to fight you."

"Like a body drawing in resources to fight disease," Yujin said. "But this body is already corrupted, its own defence mechanisms transforming it like a cancer."

"Baloc and I lived in this place," Lalia said, "but many of those now outside did not. Many will be wondering what to do next. Should they try to return where they came from? If they could even find those, they would only encounter more corruption. I imagine they, like me, fear becoming corrupted again."

"This place has room for many, but not enough," Baloc said. "Nowhere to stay, nowhere to go."

"There are a lot of people out there who don't understand what is happening, or what to do about it," Aeora said.

"People in here, too," Baloc muttered.

"The first thing is to get people organised as best we can," Lalia said. "Those of us from here can see about trying to house the others. Obviously there will be problems, like finding a place for the giants, but we can at least get a start."

"I can't help you with that," Jason said. "What I can do is look into potential threats. When you were all changed, you seemed to have an instinctive desire to attack. Did you sense my approach and attack when I was close enough, or only start moving once I was close enough to detect."

"I cannot speak for the others," Lalia said, "but my memory from that other state is hazy at best. I believe I moved the moment I sensed you. I had a sense of something alien. Something that I *needed* to destroy. The moment it came over me I scrambled with a frenzied need to do just that."

"Okay," Jason said. "Looks like things kick off the moment I get close enough, so no sneaking into undead towns. It's just rock up and go ham. Lalia, you said you're from here. Can you point me toward the nearest population centre that doesn't have any diamond-rankers?"

"Are you going to try and cleanse it, as you did us?" Yujin asked.

"Yep. I need to conquer this planet, because I've got stuff to do."

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"Small meal," Neil said. His eyes were wide as some of the plates as he looked at a banquet that could have fed a guild. "I have to point out, your majesties, that my decorum lessons mostly covered small noble houses in a small city on a remote planet. I was never instructed on the etiquette of shovelling mounds of food into my dimensional bag for later."

"Neil," Humphrey scolded, earning a chuckle from Empress Lumen.

"No, Neil is in the right," Dawn said. "In our culture, it is considered rude and extravagant to waste resources of any kind. It comes from the realities of living in places that are so heavily engineered. When presented with excess food, it is considered rude not to take and store the remainder for later. To refrain is an insult to the host. It is also rude not to have an excess to be taken, although *some people* can be excessive in their excess."

Neil and Belinda flashed a grin at each other and headed for the tables. Sophie shook her head and followed, as did Clive with a shrug. Estella looked to Humphrey and Rufus for etiquette tips, deciding that following their lead was the best way to stay out of trouble.

The dining chamber was octagonal, with buffet tables set out but no chairs or anywhere else to sit. There were stations with plates that would float around the people who claimed them, flying off to be washed once emptied of food.

"This is a traditional imperial-style feast hall," the empress explained to Humphrey as they stood together, filling hovering plates from a cornucopia of roasted vegetables. "It is designed for eating on your feet, sampling many things as you mingle with other guests."

"Jason would adore this," Humphrey said.

"This is your absent friend? The one who my Dawn is..."

"I honestly don't know what is between them," Humphrey said to her leading question. "I know that things become complex when lifespans are so long, but I am a simple man when it comes to such things. I have someone I love and will hold on to her for as long as she wishes me to. Jason, I think, has adjusted to what immortality means to relationships better than I. Whatever is between him and your daughter, I cannot say. I do know that he likes powerful women. And princesses."

"Ah. He's one of those."

"No. Well, yes. Well, no. Honestly, I don't know exactly what you mean, but probably."

"Do you respect this man?"

"Immensely. Jason has his foibles, but under all the foolishness and buffoonery, he is a hero to the core."

"A hero?"

"Yes. A childish conceit, perhaps, the good guy standing up to the bad guy. But one worth aspiring to, and something the cosmos sorely needs. He's proven that more than once."

"That's quite a claim. Are you sure you're not underestimating the scale of the cosmos?"

"That is a discussion for after dinner," Dawn said as she approached the pair. "One we should have with Lord Cazus."

"Now, that is interesting," Lumen said. "Why would you want to talk with the Director of Imperial Intelligence about some boy? Do you need us to spy on him?"

"You probably should," Belinda said around a mouthful of food as she walked by. "He did fix the cosmic throne and become the new great astral being."

"WHAT?" exclaimed the emperor, who had been pretending not to listen.