

## Chapter 425

### A Sliver of Hope

Jason's star phoenix form was impervious to almost any form of attack, with transcendent damage being a critical exception. His aura could downgrade transcendent damage, but with a diamond-ranker suppressing his aura that would not come into effect. He chose, then, to risk diving into the storm of energy reforging his spirit domain as Shako gathered transcendent energy for an attack. As he disappeared into the rainbow chaos outside of the pagoda, Dawn's true form emerged from a shimmering portal.

"That's enough, Shako."

"Dawn," Shako said, dismissing his gathered energy.

"I cannot imagine that this is what the Builder sent you here to do," Dawn said. "You have come into this world and killed Jason Asano. This is in express violation of the compact between the Builder, the Reaper and the World-Phoenix."

"This is not Asano's world," Shako countered.

"You may find it hard to convince the World-Phoenix and the Reaper of that."

"He deserved death. That man has taken that which belongs to the Builder and turned it against his faithful."

"Faithful? Is the Builder truly that obsessed with making a world so that he might become a god? He is already so much more. You realise the entire cosmos thinks he's gone mad."

"You would belittle the Builder for what he has made?" Shako asked. "Without the Fundament Gate he stole from the Builder, he would never have been able to affect this place and remake it."

"Then you should be grateful that he took it. The Builder had billions of years to rectify the mistakes of his predecessor, but his inaction has allowed the task to fall to a boy."

"You speak as if your World-Phoenix played no part."

"The World-Phoenix acts in accordance with her purpose," Dawn said, anger taking over her usually tranquil expression. "The Builder has ignored his own purpose by leaving the situation alone and has now chosen to make use of it in service of his private intentions. This world would not be crumbling if the Builder had not struck a bargain with a lowly god to exploit it."

"Perhaps I may have acted with haste," Shako conceded.

"You and your master both have a habit of thinking like mortals. You get caught up in pride and focus on singular things when you need to take a larger perspective. You are

like Asano in this way. I think, perhaps, that Thadwick Mercer was a more fitting vessel than you or the Builder are willing to admit. You pass off questionable decisions as his influence, yet is that truly the case?"

"I did not come here to be insulted or listen to your slander against my master, Dawn. There is only so much I am willing to tolerate, even from you."

"Clearly," Dawn said, looking pointedly at Jason's necklace and sword on the floor. They lay where they had fallen when Shako destroyed Jason's body. "But you didn't come here to violate the agreement your master made, either."

"I still hold that this is still not Asano's world. There is no violation."

"Then your master and mine will have to settle this with the Reaper, then."

Shako's expression took on an angry grimace.

"Perhaps I have pushed the boundaries of the agreement and a concession can be made. When Asano returns to the other world, no Builder cultist of a rank higher than his will attack him."

Dawn smiled.

"That is worth less than nothing. The Builder doesn't keep its own word, so why would it keep yours? Even if it does, so what? Your promise does not preclude diamond-rank allies or a hundred silver-rankers being sent after Asano."

"You think the Builder so petty?"

"Yes. I would advise against trying to grab my throat for saying so, though."

Shako looked as if he had eaten something unpleasant as he swallowed his retort.

Dawn waited as he took a moment to calm himself.

"What do you want?" Shako asked, his voice measured once more.

"Asano claimed for himself something created by the Builder. A door."

"The Fundament Gate. Asano should not have such access to the foundations of reality."

"If the Builder didn't want mortals to have that kind of access, he shouldn't have given it to them."

"It was an item; the Builder's to give or take. Asano should not have absorbed it."

Dawn laughed, bringing a surprised expression to Shako's face.

"If the Builder thought that mortals would only use what he gave them for the purposes he intended, then he is as great a fool as any of them."

Shako seethed at the continuing insults to the Builder but Dawn was not Jason.

Shako showed not so much as the shadow of an aggressive move.

“I don’t know why you bring up the Fundament Gate,” Shako said through gritted teeth. “Asano had already taken it for himself and the Builder has neither claim nor control over it. Again, I ask, what is it that you want?”

“I wish to create an item that he can also absorb. One that lets him use the gate to anchor a bridge between Earth and Pallimustus, using the existing link as a basis.”

“An astral bridge is the domain of the World-Phoenix,” Shako said. “You don’t need the Builder for that.”

“Improperly anchored, the bridge will be vulnerable to tampering and destruction. The Fundament gate will allow him to securely anchor it in physical reality. Give me the designs of the Fundament Gate so the World-Phoenix may create a complimentary item that works with it.”

“That is not within my authority to offer,” Shako said. “The door was the Builder’s personal design.”

“But you do have it. You simply need permission to pass it along.”

“No. You ask too much.”

“Too much? I’m not even done making demands and already you’re refusing? Then the Builder’s violation of the agreement will stand. This means that the cult of the World-Phoenix may intervene directly with the Builder’s invasion of Pallimustus. We haven’t raised our hands since before you were born, but you’ve heard the stories, right?”

Shako’s expression went dark.

“In the face of an opportunity to be free to act directly,” he asked, “why would you accept another concession? Why would you do this for Asano?”

“He’s a friend.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I originally wondered why the World-Phoenix assigned me this task personally,” Dawn said. “I came to realise that it is not always good to become too separated from mortal sensibilities. Not a problem you seem to have, but I did and the World-Phoenix saw this. This is why she sent me to watch over a man whose sensibilities are very, very mortal.”

“Why would the World-Phoenix want you to become lesser?”

“Not lesser, Shako. Grounded.”

“When you are ascending to the heavens, grounded is lesser,” Shako argued. “You and I stand on the cusp of true transcendence. Why should we care about mortal concerns?”

“Because if we don’t understand the mortal parts of ourselves, it causes problems when we leave the last of our mortality behind.”

“What kind of problems?”

“Well, for example, we might go off and start looting worlds for parts so we can cobble them together in some mad desire to play god.”

“I will only tolerate these insults to the Builder for so long, Dawn.”

“We have not yet finished negotiating the consequences of the last time your patience expired,” Dawn said, her ruby eyes glimmering and her voice filled with cool but unmistakable menace. “Are you so anxious to concede even more?”

Shako took an involuntary step back.

“That’s what I thought,” Dawn said. “Now, our time is limited and we should return to the topic at hand. The designs for the door.”

“I can likely obtain them for you,” Shako said, although his expression was unwilling. “Again, though, I have to ask why. He has knowledge and power enough to build a bridge back to the other world using the link between them. He doesn’t need this object you want to build for him. You realise that if he absorbs it, he would be intrinsically linked to the bridge he subsequently creates.”

“You realise that if he absorbs such an item and uses it, he will be intrinsically tied to it. If he dies, the bridge will collapse.”

“Yes.”

Shako narrowed his eyes.

“That’s your intention,” he realised. “You’re looking past the Builder invasion of Pallimustus.”

“Yes. Asano is yet to realise that success in his current challenge will be the very thing that sets his next one in motion.”

“You haven’t told him, have you?”

“I am forbidden. Jason does not always make the best choices and the World-Phoenix doesn’t want him finding out and risking two worlds to avoid that outcome. This bridge will be his compensation. A sliver of hope in his darkest hour.”

“When the time comes, you won’t help him?”

“It falls outside the World-Phoenix’s authority and it will not be allowed. This is the most I can do.”

“And you would give up the chance to send all your forces against us for that?”

“The World-Phoenix is not the Builder. It prefers to avoid such crude methods. But I will need another concession.”

“And what is that?”

“Allowance for me to go to Pallimustus.”

“Absurd. Do you think the great astral beings will permit a half-transcendent to intervene in a physical reality of that level? If you go, the Builder can send his own half-transcendents and by the time we're all done fighting, that world will be a lifeless cinder. Neither of us wants that.”

“I will not confront any of your forces or deliver any material aid carrying the power of the World-Phoenix, any other great astral being, or otherwise disproportional to the existing power of the world in question. Under those terms, the great astral beings will allow it.”

“Then why bother going?”

“To warn them that you are coming. And when.”

“And you think I will allow this?”

“Allow? I going to Pallimustus and you can do nothing about it. Your choice is whether I'm bringing words or an army. Unless you genuinely believe the Builder can convince the others you did not violate the compact by killing Asano.”

Once more Shako seethed in silence, before raising his eyes to glare at Dawn.

“I cared about you very deeply, once,” he said.

“Yet you never really knew me. It's a very mortal failing.”

Shako frowned and then bowed his head. A presence came over him, transforming his aura from diamond-rank to transcendent. When he stood, his expression and body language were completely different. Gone was the frustrated rage, replaced with imperious stoicism.

“You are impertinent, servant of the World-Phoenix,” the Builder said.

“My new friend has been a bad influence,” Dawn said. “I believe you've met.”

“You seek to provoke me.”

“It's worked in the past.”

“I will not expose myself to further concessions,” the Builder said. He reached into his robes and retrieved a crystal holding it up in front of her.

“The designs of the Fundament Gate. You may have it, under the condition that it is designed such that once it is complete, Asano's ability to enter the fundamental realm and manipulate it is revoked.”

“Acceptable,” Dawn said. “He only does so out of necessity and has no other reason to access it.”

“Very well,” The Builder said, handing the crystal over. “You may travel to Pallimustus. So long as your actions are in accord with what we great astral beings collectively allow, I will not count it as a violation of the compact.”

“One more thing,” Dawn said.

“You test my forbearance, servant.”

“Your servant is the one who made the violation. Be grateful the World-Phoenix is willing to accept any concessions at all.”

“What do you want?”

“Your violation was in coming here and killing Asano. You have to leave him be in the other world.”

“He will come for my people. You expect them to lay down and die?”

“You will restrict your attempts to kill him to when he comes looking for trouble. That will be almost constantly, so that should not be an onerous concession. I won't bother with specific terms as we both know there will always be ways around them. You will agree to abide by the spirit of the condition I've put forth.”

“Acceptable. Asano is no more threat to me than any other silver-ranker. He is irrelevant to my greater plans.”

Dawn raised an eyebrow but did not argue.

“Then the terms are struck,” she said.

Shako staggered as the Builder left him. He looked unhappily at Dawn, and then made for his portal, pausing before passing through.

“It was good to see you, Dawn. Even under these circumstances.”

“They're only going to get worse, Shako. You chose a master poorly.”

“I chose the right one for me,” Shako said. “You have no right to judge me.”

Dawn nodded, acknowledging the point. Shako stepped through his portal arch and it sank into the floor, vanishing. Dawn looked down at Jason's warped sword on the floor and picked it up, carrying it through her portal.

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Jason returned to the balcony as the duration of his star phoenix form came to an end. The man that killed him was gone, along with the portal he arrived in. Instead, there was a vertical sheet of silver-grey light. He looked around, finding only his necklace with his dark guardian amulet and the miniaturised cloud flask hanging from it.

His sword was nowhere to be seen. He could still feel his connection to the soul-bound item, so it wasn't destroyed, but he could not sense its location. Without it, the

additional effects of his other items would not take effect, so he couldn't call the mist shroud from his cloud flask.

Unsure of what to do next, Jason could sense the spirit domain approaching the end of its transformation. He examined the shimmering sheet of light with his aura senses which confirmed his guess that it was a portal. Like Shako's, it was diamond-rank. As he was contemplating it, Dawn stepped out. It was the first time Jason had seen her true form, her red hair replaced with the gemstone hair of a celestine. She was wearing a flowing white robe trimmed with flaming colours of orange, yellow and red.

"Dawn? Looking good. You didn't see another guy around here, did you?"

"Shako is gone."

"Good. I honestly didn't think that guy would gank me."

"You are forgetting the door you took from the Builder. Just touching on your aura will send any Builder servant into a fury."

"Oh, right. He did feel a bit like a boiling kettle, but I thought that was just about the thing between me and the Builder."

"The star seed inside him reacted negatively to your aura. If he weren't powerful enough to control the urge, he might have attacked you on sight."

"He didn't control the urge. He killed me."

"You talked to him," Dawn said.

"You say that like it's an explanation."

"Of why someone would want to kill you? It is."

"That's a little hurtful."

"Jason, I have only a short time for explanations. I must leave before the transformation zone fully merges with your world."

She held up what looked like a small model bridge. It was contained in a crystal vessel, like a ship in a bottle.

"The World-Phoenix personally crafted this item moments ago. This is an object akin to the door of the Builder, and you can absorb it the same way. Once you have restored the link between worlds to its original state, or close enough that your world isn't in immediate peril, you can use it in node space to establish a bridge between worlds."

"A bridge. As in, a walk back and forth bridge?"

"Not at first," Dawn said. "Once you establish the bridge on both sides, it will stabilise the link between worlds and prevent the link from being manipulated again. Over time, the bridge will repair the damage to your world's dimension membrane and, eventually, open a passage between the worlds."

“How eventually?”

“Years. Possibly decades.”

“It won't be my way back to Pallimustus, then.”

“It can be, if you act swiftly. When the link is restored to a close enough point to its original state, there will be a backwash of magic as your world stops absorbing all the excess magic.”

“We've talked about that before. It's what will trigger the monster surge in Pallimustus and let the Builder invade.”

“Yes. But you can also use that surge and the incomplete bridge to travel to Pallimustus, so long as you do so before the magical backwash dissipates. The outworlder gift evolution the World-Phoenix designed for you will allow you to survive the journey. Anyone you carry inside your spirit vault will be safe.”

“Will you be coming with us? I know you won't go by spirit vault but you have an interdimensional spaceship or something, right? I'm assuming that's where that portal come from since you don't have a portal power yourself.”

“It is, and I will be leaving for the other world. Ahead of you, in fact.”

“You're going now,” Jason realised.

“You have everything you need to do what must be done. More than that, I trust you to do it. The other world needs me more than you do.”

“For what?”

“After years of being in readiness for a monster surge that never comes, the other world will not be prepared when it finally does. We have a good estimate of how long you will take to repair the link so I'm going to warn them that it's close.”

“I'll see you there, then?”

“You will, although do not anticipate me solving your problems for you. I still have restrictions by which I must abide.”

“Of course you do. Can you check in on my friends for me?”

“I can and will.”

Jason pulled a recording crystal from his inventory and tossed it to her.

“Show that to my mates, yeah?”

“I will.”

“One last thing before I go. Once you complete the bridge on the other side, you will lose access to node space.”

“At that point, I won't need it. What about the effect the door has on Builder minions?”

“The lost power to open node space will be channelled into enhancing that effect.”



Jason grinned.

“I’ll call that a win.”

Dawn looked past Jason at the energy storm swirling beyond the balcony.

“I cannot delay any longer.”

“Yeah, no worries. Oh, have you seen my sword? The other guy didn’t take it, did he?”

“Your sword is in no state to be of use, so I have taken it,” she said walking up to the portal. “It shall be waiting for you in the other world.”

“Nice. You know, for a super god’s lackey, you’re an alright sheila.”

“Better to be a queen than a pawn, Jason.”

Before he could respond, she stepped through the shimmering portal and it vanished.

“Buggering off with the last bloody word, are you?” he said to the empty space the portal had occupied. A warm smile crossed his face.

“Yeah,” he conceded. “It was a pretty good exit line.”