

## Chapter 461

### Of Course He Doesn't Have Pants

In an abandoned outback town, there was something unusual on the dry grass of the football oval. Large stones were set into arches, forming a series of concentric circles. Next to the bar, the only properly-maintained building, was a long wooden grandstand, bleached by the sun. Jason and Farrah had been sitting on it for some time, talking.

"It's time," Jason said and stood up.

"You know they're watching us, right?" Farrah asked as she did the same.

"Leave them to their petty squabbles. I'm done."

"Did you end up talking to Amy?" Farrah asked as they left the grandstand and started walking across the grass. "I know you were in two minds about it."

"I did," Jason said. "Not that there was much to say. It was just sad, more than anything. Once upon a time, we knew each other better than anyone. Than we knew ourselves. Now we barely recognise one another. I think we both felt the loss."

"She wasn't angry?"

"She was tired. Kaito made his own choice to stand up for his world and she knows that. It doesn't change the fact that her kids will grow up without their father."

They walked across the football field, through the stone structures Farrah had put in place. In the centre was an empty circle.

"You won't be back for a long time," Farrah said. "If you want a last look around, this is it. A day or two won't make a difference."

Jason opened a portal to his spirit vault and stepped through without looking back.

Jason's spirit vault was increasingly becoming less of a vault and more of a realm. Not only was his rank growing but the racial power that created it had gone through a rare secondary evolution. He had absorbed the power of the Builder's dimensional door and the World-Phoenix's dimensional bridge. Most of all, his soul had undergone tribulations and come out all the stronger.

The layout of his spirit realm reflected his spirit domains, with a pagoda tower at the centre made of dark crystal infused with sparkling, transcendent light. From there, a vast estate of cloud buildings sprawled out into gardens that ranged from wild groves to carefully cultivated gardens to a cave system filled with luminescent fungus.

At the edge of his domain was a wall of darkness that seemed to devour the light around it. Even the starry void beyond was bright by comparison. The most prominent change brought about by the World-Phoenix's bridge was that the wall now had an arched

gate. Beyond the gate, a rainbow bridge extended into the star-speckled dark. In the distance, a stream of light, also filled with rainbow hues, extended into the void past Jason and Farrah's ability to make out where it began or ended.

Jason had god-like control over his spirit realm and with a blur, he and Farrah were standing at the gate. It was a solid construction of the same dark, sparkling crystal as the pagoda. At a gesture from Jason, it sank into the ground, opening the dark wall that separated the physical space of his spirit realm from the astral void surrounding it. The rainbow bridge spanning out towards the distant stream of similarly polychromatic light.

"That's the link between worlds?" Farrah asked.

"Beyond this wall is the deep astral," Jason said. "What we're seeing is more metaphor than reality. My spirit realm trying to quantify that which cannot be quantified."

"So, how does this work?"

"However I like."

Jason flicked his hand in another gesture and his entire spirit realm started moving along the rainbow bridge. It accelerated more and more until Farrah realised that what she thought was a narrow stream of energy in the distance was planetary in scale, simply much further away than she realised. As they drew closer, they reached the point where all they could see was a vast rainbow wall in front of them.

The spirit realm passed into the stream, the rainbow energy engulfing them but not crossing beyond the wall or an invisible dome above it. The gate rose back up and Jason turned away.

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The people observing the stone formation from several kilometres away in a helicopter watched as the ordinary stone transmuted into dark crystal, the inside of it speckled with shifting blue, silver and gold light. They reported that Jason Asano had left the Earth behind.

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Jason's team, plus Rufus, Gary and Jory, stood before Dawn in a confrontational array, with Virid sitting obediently at the picnic table behind them. The twisted remains of the sword Gary once gave Jason still rested in Gary's hands.

The local townsfolk knew adventurer business when they saw it and had already given the group a wide berth. After Gary's stone-shattering roar from earlier, they gave it a wider one.

"Why should we believe you?" Sophie asked Dawn. "If Jason's alive, where is he?"

“Jason is on his own world,” Clive said. His eyes moved side to side as he absently scratched his head, his mind putting the pieces together. He looked up, starting slightly as he noticed everyone looking at him. He turned to Dawn.

“You serve the World-Phoenix, don’t you?” he asked her. She smiled.

“He wasn’t wrong about you being the smart one,” she said. “I spent a lot of time with Jason’s collection of astral magic theory. Your notes are impressively insightful, Mr Standish. Especially given the level of astral magic in this world.”

“What’s a world phoenix?” Gary asked.

“A great astral being,” Clive said. “I only know a little, but my understanding is that it’s largely antagonistic to the Builder. Its domain is dimensional integrity, which directly clashes with the Builder’s plundering of worlds.”

“Then where has it been all this time?” Sophie demanded. “Is its other domain taking a nap when it should be getting off its butt and kicking the Builder in the fruit basket?”

“The World-Phoenix is famously indirect,” Clive said. “It works through agents and pawns, which is why information about it is limited. The very fact that one of its agents is here at all is quite worrying. It makes me wonder what the Builder had planned that would warrant intervention.”

“You are right to worry,” Dawn said.

“What does any of this have to do with Jason?” Rufus asked.

“Jason always said he had a way back home,” Clive said.

“One that he didn’t know how to use,” Sophie added. “He showed it to me once. It was an item. Red, with a picture of a bird on it.”

“So it’s true, then,” Clive said. “World-Phoenix tokens really can bring back the dead.”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “This is why they are handed out sparingly. Jason Asano was reborn in his own world.”

“I thought his world didn’t have magic,” Gary said. “What would someone like you be doing there?”

“Jason’s world held many secrets. On returning, he found himself with responsibilities that someone of his rank should not have had to shoulder. Enemies whose power utterly dwarfed his own.”

“No change there, then,” Jory muttered. “Still picking fights he can’t win.”

“I never said he didn’t win,” Dawn said. “Jason managed to provoke my counterpart within the Builder’s forces into overstepping his bounds. This has forced certain compromises on the Builder’s part, allowing for my presence here. There are extreme

restrictions on my power to intervene directly on events but I have already started preparing this world for what comes next.”

“Which is what?” Humphrey asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Sophie said. “The issue is Jason.”

“Since I left Jason’s world,” Dawn continued, “he apparently provoked the man again. In recompense, I am allowed a single instance of intervention on behalf of this world, using the full measure of my power. I intend to use it well.”

“If you were in Jason’s world,” Sophie said, “why didn’t you bring him back?”

“I told you that he has responsibilities,” Dawn said. “Once they are complete, he will return on his own. Further explanation can be left to Jason himself, once he returns, other than to say that when he does, the monster surge will begin.”

“Why?” Rufus asked. “How?”

“And I’m thinking we should get those further explanations now,” Sophie said.

“I will explain the details to Mr Standish soon enough,” Dawn said. “He’s the only one who would truly understand what is happening anyway and can explain it for you in turn. As for further explanations, I have something that you will want to see more.”

“Hold on,” Humphrey said. “You’re doing a lot of talking, but words are easy. I haven’t seen anything to prove you aren’t just playing some game with us.”

“And he said you were the naïve one,” Dawn said to Humphrey. “Mr Blacksmith, would you care to reassure them?”

“The sword,” Virid said, standing up. The group suddenly remembered the blade in Gary’s hands.

“If it’s truly soul-bonded to your friend and your friend is alive,” Virid continued, “then it cannot be hidden from Gary in the process of reforging. It will give us a definitive answer.”

“Still,” Belinda said to Dawn. “He could have at least given you a recording crystal to bring back to us for evidence.”

“He did,” Dawn said. “I’ve been trying to tell you that but you keep interrupting. No wonder you all became his friends. You’re as bad as he is.”

“How much time did you spend with Jason?” Rufus asked.

“You just can’t stop, can you?” Dawn asked. “You genuinely all deserve each other. I spent more time with Jason than you, Mr Remore. My powers were severely restricted, however. For most of our time together, he was more powerful than I. Now, if you’re all quite done, does anyone have a recording crystal projector?”

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Jason and Farrah lay back in lounge chairs made out of cloud stuff, watching the rainbow energies pass over Jason's spirit realm. Then they spotted a figure float swiftly past and they both sat up.

"Was that...?" Farrah asked.

"TV's Patrick Duffy, yeah," Jason said. "I didn't know he was an interdimensional being."

Farrah gave him a flat look.

"Or, it's possible that my spirit realm imprinting physical reality onto a non-physical space is causing anomalous manifestations projected from my psyche."

"And what your mind threw out was Patrick Duffy?"

"He was in *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *Dallas* and *Step by Step*, Farrah. That's a daytime soap, a primetime soap and a classic nineties sitcom; all iconic examples of their respective genres. He's a titan of the industry."

"Most of that is from before you were born. Your father has a lot to answer for."

"Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it, which is probably why they rebooted *Dallas*. Also, you know a lot for someone who claims to hate television."

"I really, really need to get back to my own world."

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Clive's crystal projector was set on the picnic table Virid had been sitting at, the group now all gathered around it.

"I haven't seen this," Dawn admitted. "We were both rather caught up in events and he handed it to me as I was leaving his world."

"You don't have an image projector?" Humphrey asked.

"It's primitive magic," Dawn said. "My dimensional vessel doesn't have one. I could have gotten one while I was here, but it seemed right that you should all see it first. He made it for you, after all."

She placed the crystal in the projector and an image blinked to life over the table. It was Jason, covered in blood and dust, wearing nothing but boxer shorts with love hearts on them. He was sporting a slew of wounds, although they were closing at a rate fast enough for them to see.

"Of course he doesn't have pants," Rufus laughed, the delight at seeing his friend thick in his voice.

"I haven't done this in a while, the magic being kind of crap in my world," Jason said.

"So, the recording crystals don't work so well. I'll catch you all up at some point but I'm kind

of in the middle of something right now. I guess I can hit the highlights. Farrah's alive; that's a winner. So am I, for that matter, which may be—”

Gary's hand slammed down, pausing the projection.

“Yes,” Dawn said. “She's alive. I've spent quite some time with her, in fact. You could say she is a mutual friend.”

Rufus and Gary shared a look; hope and joy tempered by a fear that all this was some cruel, elaborate ruse. Sophie, who had only heard about Farrah, reached out to resume the recording.

“...more surprising,” Jason continued. “I die kind of a lot. Is three times a lot? I mean, three isn't a big number, but not many people hit the triple when it comes to carking it. I think three counts as a lot.”

He panned the crystal away from himself, showed off some kind of city street with an architectural style that none of them were familiar with. There was debris all over the street, courtesy of a collapsed nearby building. Jason panned the crystal back to himself.

“I'm saving the world, so I'd best get back to it,” he said. “As you can see, I'm standing in my underwear in the middle of the street, covered in blood, next to a building I just blew up. The street is in an extradimensional city I'm taking over so a hole doesn't get blasted in the side of the universe. Mondays, am I right? Oh, wait; you have a six-day week. Still, it's a day of the week. It's not that hard to pick up from context.”

“Hole in the universe?” Clive asked. “How is that even possible, and why is—”

“Clive,” Jason's projection cut in, wagging a disapproving finger. “I know you've got questions but stop interrupting. People are trying to listen to the recording. Be courteous and wait.”

The group burst out laughing at the expression on Clive's face, the tension they all had breaking like an overflowing dam. They watched Jason pull out a flask of cleaning solution and pour it over himself. He winced as it stung his wounds.

“Jory, if you're watching this, I want you to know I have a new appreciation for the quality of your crystal wash. I am going to need quite a lot of it once I get back, by the way. Like, a lot. I don't want to go running out again, so waaay more than last time.”

Jason tipped another flask of the cleaning solution over some strange looking weapons before putting them away in his inventory.

“Anyway, none of my essence abilities work here, which sucks. I spent the last few hours fighting it out with a small army of astronauts with ray guns, which was pretty awesome. I'll explain what they are later.”

Jason reached up to the crystal and the projection ended.