

Chapter 414

Instinct is All We Have

Sprawled on the ground, Jason was hammered by a crowd of people-shaped anomalies with planks and pipes and cricket bats. His sword had skewered one of them right through the face, and it fell on top of him. Using it as a shield, he pushed up to his feet, although the corpse made a poor barrier. Attacks continued to rain down from every direction, pummelling his head, back and arms. One of the anomalies even bit into him like a zombie.

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- You have been afflicted with [Streptococcus].
 - You have resisted.

 - You have been afflicted with [Reality Dysphoria].
 - You already possess a gestalt physical/spiritual nature.
 - [Reality Dysphoria] has no effect.

Jason burst out of the crowd, running before too much of the anomaly horde crowded around him. He barrelled through groups of three or four charging at him while avoiding larger clusters as he sprinted for the pagoda. Even so, he continued to take repeated blows as he blasted past the anomalies.

He was reminded of his first fight with a silver-ranker when his team fought the archbishop of Purity, Nicholas Hendren. Their bronze-rank attacks seemed futile as he took hit after hit without slowing down. Jason absently wondered if the rabid anomalies felt the same frustration as he continued blowing past them. He doubted they had much capacity to think at all.

Jason's domain beyond the pagoda wasn't that large and, even impeded, he was moving with silver rank speed. He neared the pagoda swiftly but there was a crowd of anomalies around it as if they had anticipated his retreat. Not slowing down, Jason started condensing his mist shroud into steps, running over the head of the anomalies and onto the second-floor balcony.

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- You have abandoned your incomplete spirit domain territory while anomalies are present.

 - Your spirit domain will retract over time until you return or all anomalies are destroyed.

- If anomalies remain when all non-territory domain space has reverted to genesis space, anomalies will be able to attack your completed territory.
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“Oh, strewth,” Jason complained, rolling his shoulders painfully. None of the attacks had been critical but he felt like he’d been run over by a car. He was rapidly healing though, with the bite mark on his arm already closed. He turned to look out as the crowd of anomalies gathering like a sea around his pagoda. At least he could no longer sense new one spawning, although perhaps they would if he went back out.

“How am I going to deal with...”

He trailed off as he sensed a new presence emerge from the portal, quickly followed by three more.

“Ask and ye shall receive, I guess.”

Jason moved inside from the balcony and over to the elevator that provided an alternative to the stairs, pressing the button.

“I don’t know how they managed to get in, but I’ll take it.”

Chen arrived through the portal, followed by Gerling and then the other two category fours from China. Guo was one of China’s weakest category fours, having earned his place in the program through family connections and was not widely respected by the others. The more capable Tran was Vietnamese, one of many talented essence users poached by China over the years.

They looked around at the dark crystal room with the wall planters as they adjusted to the effects of the space. There was a white wooden door but no windows, while light came from a crystal set into the ceiling. Their mana was rapidly being consumed by the shields that Chen had placed on them, but a category four’s mana pool was deep and being constantly replenished by their recovery attribute. It wasn’t enough to remain perpetually, but they would have a decent amount of freedom to explore.

Their powers were sealed off, yet the place was oddly comfortable. In the normal world, the low quality of magic meant that only the power of the reality cores sustained them, while the magic in this place was far richer. Aside from that was an aura pressing in on them that Gerling recognised. Like Jason had been on first arriving, their auras were completely suppressed and the ability to extend their aura senses with them. Only because the aura was imposing itself on them could they detect it.

“Asano,” Gerling muttered.

None of them were able to exercise their own auras, making resisting the aura pressing on them unpleasant, but it didn’t have any deleterious effect.

“Curious,” Chen said, looking around. “This doesn’t look anything like the agrarian land that the dome originally covered. Additionally, this room appears to have been built specifically to house the portal.”

They glanced at the still-open portal and the rainbow light within. They had all dropped into it, yet found themselves walking out of an archway. It was a disorienting switch, especially in addition to the normal queasiness and disorientation of passing through a portal.

"We're on the clock," Gerling said. "Let's go looking around."

The normal procedure for the factions on entering a fresh transformation zone was to scour it for the reality core. This was usually an easy task due to the cores lighting up like a beacon to magical senses. The hope was that this still-changing transformation zone would have more cores but cut off from their magical senses they couldn’t detect anything.

“Agreed,” Chen said. “We should remain as a group, at least until we have a better idea of what we’re dealing wi—”

He stopped as the door was flung open to reveal Jason Asano.

“Right, you lot,” Jason demanded. “Come with me.”

He turned to leave when Guo called out to him.

“You don’t tell us what to do, Asano.”

Jason turned back, pointed an arm at the portal and then closed his fist. The rainbow light in the portal vanished as it was sealed.

“I do now.”

Guo used his gold rank reflexed to grab Jason by the neck, dash across the hall outside the room and slam him into the wall.

“You think I can’t make you do whatever I want?”

Jason looked at Guo calmly, even as he was held against the wall by the throat, feet dangling. His voice was in no way choked off as he spoke.

“While I have no doubt you have a gleeful aptitude for cruelty, I’ve been tortured by the bloke who creates universes. Whatever you can do to me, I promise you that I’ve been through worse. Those shields won’t last forever, so, yeah; I don’t think you can make me do whatever you want. Now, put me down or I leave you in here until you dissolve like a soluble aspirin.”

Guo’s hand closed tighter on Jason’s neck.

“You’ll die here too.”

“I’ve died before. It never seems to stop me.”

“Guo, that’s enough!” Chen barked. He had let Guo off his leash long enough to get the measure of Asano and had found himself impressed. Guo would be an acceptable price to pay for the assistance of someone who clearly understood the space more than they did. Chen would happily kill Guo himself in trade for some of Asano’s secrets.

Guo reluctantly let Jason go, who dropped to the floor. Chen saw the heavy indentations of Guo's hand already healing on Jason's neck in a display of healing speed that rivalled a gold ranker.

“Do you have your powers?” Gerling asked, having noticed the same thing.

“No, but I have a little aura control.”

“A little bit?” Gerling asked, still feeling the power of Jason’s aura overwhelming the room.

“That’s not me,” Jason said. “That’s the place we’re in.”

“Why does this place have your aura?” Chen asked.

“Because I’m taking it over,” Jason said. “The proto space and the transformation zone aren’t playing nice. The instability is going to leave a wound in the side of the universe if we let it fester. I’m stabilising this place as best I can.”

“How?” Gerling asked.

“Yeah, because I’m going to tell you that,” Jason said. “Look, as I see it, you’ve got three options. One, you kill me, I come back to life and get on with saving the world while your shields crap out and you all die. I don’t know if you can come back from that, that’s your business. Two, you all sod off looking for loot, although I haven’t spotted any reality cores, so good luck. Then you eventually die. Three, you do what I say, maybe we save the world and I let you all out.”

“What guarantee do we have that you won’t just leave us in here anyway?” Gerling asked.

“Oh, I’m going to kill you, if you live long enough,” Jason said. “But not today. The Cabal is under new management and I think we all know that war is inevitable. You’re going to explode a lot of vampires before I put you down. Now, you’re not the only ones on a clock, so get your arses in gear and come with me.”

Jason rode the elevator in his magic interdimensional pagoda, along with four powerful magicians, including the man who killed his brother.

"I used to work in retail stationery," he mused. "It's been an odd few years."

“Since we have agreed to help you,” Chen said, “would you be willing to offer a little reciprocation?”

“For help saving the world that you live on?” Jason asked pointedly. “What exactly do you have in mind?”

“You have repeatedly claimed that you are acting to save the world and our people are inclined to believe you. Beyond stating that claiming reality cores works against this end, however, you have offered up little information about the nature of the threat and how you will go about stopping it.”

“I’ll admit that I’ve been high-handed with my information,” Jason said. “That’s because I didn’t want people like you trying to use me once you found out what you could use me for. With the events of today, though, I think its safe to say that I’m now squarely in everyone’s attention.”

The elevator reached the ground floor and they stepped out, the gold-rankers looking around at the opulent atrium with the waterfall dropping into the middle of the floor.

“I’ve been trying to prevent a disaster from destroying our world,” Jason said. “This place threatens to accelerate that disaster precipitously. Once it’s dealt with, I’ll explain everything. From a safe distance.”

“I appreciate the concession,” Chen said. “What needs doing now?”

Jason pointed to the stone double doors.

“Outside there is a lot of things that look like angry people, but aren’t. They aren’t very strong but there’s a lot of them. We have to kill them all.”

When Jason gestured at the doors and they swung open, the four gold-rankers shot out like missiles, with appropriately explosive results. Given the space to move around and swing his sword, Jason could quickly carve through the weak anomalies but the gold rankers were so powerful that the tighter they clustered the better.

Gerling didn’t have his explosion powers but it was hard to tell as a single swing of his fist burst two or even three anomaly heads like an overripe melon being hit by a baseball bat. The Vietnamese man, Tran, moved in swift, jerking motions, efficiently striking out with his fist like a boxer. His hands never stopped moving as he moved through the anomalies like a threshing machine.

Chen was even more clinical, wiping out anomalies faster than anyone. With his fingers clustered together like a bird’s beak, his hands pecked holed in the faces of anomalies, with two more being killed before the first hit the ground. Chen and Tran both demonstrated that not every essence user from Earth lacked the skill to match their power. The other Chinese gold-ranker was clearly the least capable of the group but even he was a force to be reckoned with by dint of raw power.

Jason participated, cleaning up the more scattered anomalies after the others passed through the crowd like a hurricane. Even with the gold rankers hammering away, there was no shortage of leftovers given the sheer numbers, Jason's sword flickered in the starlight, reaping anomalies at a pace that almost matched the weakest of the gold rankers.

Soon the ground was painted with the grim remnants of the anomalies, which appeared human when intact but were revealed to be human-shaped masses of flesh once their facades were blasted apart by the violent attacks of the gold-rankers. Looking around, Jason reflected on the fact that his own body was much the same.

They cleared out the open spaces and started going after the ones still in the buildings, with Jason directing the others to where he sensed them. More of the anomalies continued to spawn, but they seemed to do so at a rate commensurate with the number of live anomalies that had already invaded Jason's domain. When the place had been swarming, that swarm rapidly grew, the spawn rate diminishing as the gold-rankers aggressively thinned-out the numbers. After Jason sensed the last anomaly fall, he moved to the edge of his domain where it met the dark fog of gloom to be certain.

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- You are at the border of your spirit domain. Minimum cost to expand: 78 [Stable Genesis Cores].
 - Maximum strength of non-anomalies in your domain: gold-rank. On expanding your domain, anomaly strength will be proportional to the most powerful non-anomaly present.
 - You have insufficient cores to expand your domain.
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Since the domain could be expanded, that meant the existing anomalies were finished. That the next set of anomalies would be gold-rank if the gold-rank essence users remained was not completely a surprise, as Jason had already postulated that the space was reacting to his rank.

Gerling and Chen approached him as Guo and Tran were examined the dead anomalies.

"So it's done?" Gerling asked.

"Hmm?" Jason said, looking up distractedly from his system window. "No, it's barely begun. But you three have to leave. I'll open the portal back up."

"We can return, once we've replenished our mana," Chen said.

"No," Jason said. "I have to continue stabilising the zone and if you're here, the next lot of these things will be scaled to your power, not mine."

“Can we not leave, have you trigger the next set of them and then return?”

“Maybe,” Jason acknowledged. “A loophole that makes things that easy makes me suspicious, though. We might have gotten away with it once, but I’m not sure that this place would keep doing it.”

“You say that like this place has an intelligence,” Chen said.

“I don’t know about intelligence,” Jason said, “but I do know that cosmic forces can have a will. I’ve experienced it for myself. There’s something about this place. It’s like the fractured dream of a wounded animal, lashing out in its nightmare.”

“That seems like a jump,” Gerling said.

“Yeah,” Jason admitted. “But we’re through the looking glass, here. Sometimes instinct is all we have, even if it’s unreliable, and I don’t think trying to loophole a gaping wound in reality is a risk I want to take.”

“And if I do?” Gerling asked.

“Then you’re an idiot,” Jason said. “And for all you’re a huge bogan-looking prick, I don’t think you are.”

“What’s a bogan?”

“Hey!” Tran called out, striding towards the group with something bloody in his hands. “Don’t listen to him. This is why he wants us gone.”