

Chapter 426

End-User Licence Agreement

Jason looked out at the swirling rainbow energy beyond the pagoda. A moment of desperation had led him to dive into it while in the star phoenix form following his latest resurrection. The energy that had passed through him in that unusual state had once more heightened his understanding of the astral energies at play.

The gains were not worth the trade-off. Jason no longer had the safety net of his resurrection power, at least not until he ranked up in a decade or more. There was nothing he could have done in the face of a diamond-ranker and he still didn't know if that had been the Builder's intention all along.

Had the Builder sent Shako ostensibly under a flag of resolving conflict that he might 'lose control' and kill Jason in anger? Was the entire purpose to try and strike at Jason when the agreement with the other great astral beings was arguably not in effect? No one was under the illusion that Jason would actually die, but now he would head back to a world full of the Builder's minions with permanent death very much a concern.

Jason reached out a hand and let the rainbow light flow through his fingers, no longer fearful of the energies involved. He now understood both it and himself enough that he no longer feared contacting it. Jason's body, like the energy itself, was a gestalt of the physical and the spiritual, of matter and non-material forces not just paired like body and soul, but reforged into something else.

Jason also had some ability to manipulate the rainbow energy. This was a combination of his nature, his understanding and one of the effects of the bespoke outworlder power the World-Phoenix designed for him.

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- While within the astral you will be able to create and maintain a small zone of physical reality around you. This does not grant the ability to enter or traverse the astral.

Jason didn't do anything with the energy as it washed between his fingers, not being foolish enough to interfere with the larger process going on. At first, it had seemed like the pagoda would remain unchanged, but this was not the case.

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- Pagoda transfiguration will take place in stages. Please evacuate the third floor.
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“Wait,” Jason said. “Is that the European/Australian floor naming where it goes ground floor, then first floor, second floor, etc, so what’s called the third floor is the fourth level of the building? Or is it the system they use everywhere else, where the ground level is the first floor, the second level is the second floor, etc?”

Help: Localised Floor Designations

- Floor numbering begins on the ground floor, with the first floor above it being designated the ‘first floor.’ Would you like to change the numbering to an alternate system?

“It’s fine. I just don’t want to evacuate the wrong floor.”

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- The third floor is the fourth level of the building. Please evacuate any people and do not allow access during the transfiguration process.

The Slovakian family was one level below that, on the floor made up entirely of residential suites.

“Shade, make sure our guests don’t go wandering.”

“Of course, Mr Asano.”

After a short while, energy flooded over the pagoda balcony on the third floor, washing in and sending the pagoda through another transformation. After it washed back out, the system warned Jason to evacuate the top floor, then the others in descending order. He wasn’t sure why the process started on the second-highest floor but it was likely because that’s where the portal room was.

Jason reunited with the family as they played musical chairs with the transforming pagoda levels. The transformed levels took a form much more like the city around it had been, constructed out of cloud-stuff in fairy tale colours, mimicking the makeup of the constructs from Jason’s cloud flask. This was everything from walls, floors and ceilings to furniture and fittings.

The transformation also came with a redesign. The ground floor remained much the same: an atrium with a waterfall in the middle of the room, spilling from the mezzanine above. The first floor continued to overlook the atrium but was an open space that was the new portal area. There were ten portal arches, all in the dark crystal of Jason’s portal arch, but none of them were active.

The second floor was taken up by what looked to be an administrative centre, with offices and a bullpen. The third, formerly the portal room level, was taken up by a single

residential suite with multiple bedrooms. The top floor was a single bedroom residential suite. The entire pagoda was flooded with Jason's aura, which felt benevolent rather than hostile, except for on the top floor. There it was heavy and oppressive, except to Jason himself.

There were also new levels underground, which were empty storage spaces. As with the top floor, Jason's aura was much stronger there.

As Jason explored the pagoda in the wake of its latest changes, he felt the energy outside start to thin. It was imperceptible to ordinary senses, at first, but by the time Jason was again standing on the top floor balcony, it was visibly disappearing. He started seeing the city reappear through the swirling rainbow light and spotted the dome high above. As expected, the pagoda was placed directly under the dome's peak. Unlike when he had entered, the dome was much darker, but with a swirling nebula of colour.

Gerling could sense the change in the dome. It was the first time this idiosyncratic example held true to his experiences from other transformation zones, as it was the familiar feeling of a dome about to vanish, revealing what lay inside.

Gerling was far from the only one poised to move after sensing the change, and when parts of the dome started to dissolve, all the people who had been wary after the dome's changes suddenly charged back up the sides, looking for holes to dive into. Gerling didn't join them, remaining impassively at the edge of the American Network camp. The other gold-ranker from the US, who had arrived just hours ago, did not share his reticence, tearing off at speed.

"Gerling!" his handler, Cleary yelled. "Why aren't you moving?"

"I'll go when I'm good and ready," Gerling snarled.

"Every major force in the world has bolstered their presence here, and you want to play wait and see?"

Gerling looked at Cleary with disdain.

"I've been in there once. Rushing around is a good way to get killed."

"That was when it was active," Cleary said. "Now that the dome is coming down, normal magical conditions will reassert themselves."

Gerling didn't bother to argue, closing his eyes and extending his senses. With the dome at its centre, Asano's aura had covered a geographically significant portion of western Slovakia. Gerling felt it now start to rapidly contract. He wanted to see what state it ended up in before he approached the swiftly-opening transformation zone.

"I didn't take you for a coward," Cleary said and Gerling's eyes shot open to get a missile lock on Cleary's face. Gerling's aura squeezed Cleary's like a car compactor until Cleary stood quivering on the spot.

"I'm sorry, I was distracted," Gerling apologised. "I didn't hear that last thing you said. Would you be so kind as to repeat it?"

Cleary's mind was screaming at his legs to run but they wouldn't listen.

"Mr Cleary?" Gerling asked quizzically.

Gerling released his aura and Cleary fled in a stumbling run.

The rainbow light was gone and sunlight broke through the dome more and more as it dissolved away. It lit up the fairytale kingdom that Jason's city had turned into, with colourful cloud houses, tiled pathways, flowers, trees and parks. The designs were an eclectic hodgepodge of styles, drawing influences from across the world, with Middle-eastern influences bumping into Japanese, South American and European influences. It should have been a hodgepodge, yet somehow worked, the odd, magical materials and bright colours tying it all together.

"In an animated movie kind of way," Jason mumbled to himself as he looked it over. He was anxiously awaiting system boxes that he knew would be coming.

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- You have successfully separated the overlapping transformation zone and proto-space. Transformation zone is reintegrating with physical reality. Effects of the abnormal space are no longer in place. Your essence abilities are unsealed.
 - Transformation zone was not fully stabilised. Reintegration with physical reality is having a localised disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane, risking rupture.
 - Proto-space has been stabilised into a permanent astral space. This is stabilising the disruption and dispersing it to have a diminished effect over a wider area.
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Jason felt a tremble in the ambient magic. To him, with his soul strength and connection to the astral, it was a ripple in a pond. He could sense that it was happening on a massive scale, however, and worried that to others it would be a tsunami.

While there were many silver and even gold-rank individuals around the dome, there were far more bronze and iron-rankers in the camps in supporting roles. When the world's magic became a tidal wave of chaos, the silver-rankers fared well enough and the gold-rankers were fine but the rest fell to the ground, screaming.

Gerling felt some of the iron-rank auras get snuffed out as they couldn't handle the pressure and died. The normal rankers in the area, mostly in the nearby city of Nitra, did not seem to be affected in any impactful fashion, at least so far as Gerling's senses could make out.

Gerling closed his eyes, expanding his aura over the American network's camp and trying to shield it from the effects. It was only partially effective, but that was enough to bring the bronze-rankers to their senses, while the iron-ranks went from tortured screams to pain-stricken moans.

Jason jumped lightly off the balcony, grabbed the edge of the roof above with his restored shadow arm and flicked himself onto it. Standing at the peak of the slope, he observed his surroundings as the dome continued to dissolve over his head.

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- Dimensional disruption has rendered the dimensional membrane more permeable, raising the baseline magic density level of [Earth]. Localised zones of increased dimensional permeability will have heightened levels of magical density.
 - Once the new levels of ambient magic have normalised, [Earth] will no longer be subject to restrictions on mana, stamina and health recovery due to extreme low magic conditions.
 - Due to increased levels of magic permeability, magic will no longer accumulate externally and manifest as proto-spaces. Magic will manifest directly in the world.
 - [Earth] is currently subject to an abnormally large influx of magic. The newly permeable dimensional membrane is more vulnerable to excessive magic and will degenerate more rapidly.
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Jason's shoulder slumped with relief. It was far from good news, but at least the world wasn't going to be destroyed this week.

"Congratulations, Mr Asano," Shade said, manifesting from Jason's shadow. "You just saved the world."

Jason let out a weary laugh.

"I thought it would feel awesome, but I'm just tired."

"Perhaps it will feel better after you have time to rest," Shade suggested.

"I don't have time to rest," Jason said. He could already feel silver and gold-rankers encroaching on his spirit domain.

As anticipated, his domain now covered the space up to his second territory, which was the original stretch of city. The rest had been shunted into an astral space that he could sense, both with his power to detect astral spaces and through his connection to it.

He felt the power of his spirit domain settling around him and it was accompanied by a wall of text.

- You have established a permanent spirit domain. The maximum total area your spirit domains can cover is limited by your soul strength and your rank. Current amount of maximum spirit domain established: 3264%. Increase your rank to increase your maximum total spirit domain size.
- This spirit domain has a connected astral space. The astral space gains the full effects of your spirit domain but does not count against your maximum spirit domain size. The portals in the [Arrival Pagoda] connecting to various locations in the astral space are now active. Any non-hostile may use the portals by default but you may individually grant or deny access or set alternate criteria for entry.
- The magical density of your spirit domains and the interconnected astral spaces is artificially limited to silver-rank. This only effects monster manifestations as non-monster manifestations are not connected to magical rank. Increase your rank to increase the level of monster manifestations that occur within your spirit domains.
- Monster manifestations will be shifted to outside of your spirit domain or into wilderness areas of the attached astral space. Monsters that manifest into wilderness areas of the astral space are not subject to the negative effects of the astral space.
- Anyone or anything hostile to you, your domain or any non-hostiles within your domains will immediately acquire the [Blood From a Stone], [Mortality] and [Weakness of the Flesh] afflictions. They will also continually accumulate instances of the [Sin] affliction, which they will clearly sense. Those that remain for extended periods will periodically accumulate instances of the [Wages of Sin] affliction. Any hostile actions against you, your domain or anyone within your domain will immediately accumulate additional instances of [Wages of Sin]. All spirit domain effects ignore rank disparity and cannot be resisted or cleansed but end immediately on departure from the spirit domain.
- Anyone who dies from the effects of the spirit domain will be consumed by transcendent damage. They will be looted and their possessions will be sent to the vault in the [Arrival Pagoda] of that domain space.
- Hostility is determined by the true intent of those entering your spirit domain. Their true intent cannot be hidden by any means, including self-deception. You may individually designate anyone within your spirit domain as hostile or non-hostile at any time.
- Those who truly venerate you while within your spirit domain will have instances of curse, disease, poison, holy and unholy afflictions periodically converted to instances of [Integrity].
- You can sense the location and aura of anyone within any of your spirit domains at any time, over any distance. There are no means to avoid this effect, regardless of rank or nature of the ability. At your current rank, this effect can cross the localised

dimensional boundary of an astral space but not between universes. Increase your rank to sense your spirit domains in alternate realities.

"It's like an end-user licence agreement. Can I just hit 'I agree' and move on?"

Jason understood what his spirit domain could do through his connection to it. The whole veneration aspect worried him a great deal so he put it aside to concentrate on the aspects that would keep him alive with as a good portion of the world's magical power descending on him.

Broadly speaking, anyone who invaded the domain with hostile intent would get a warning as they accumulated the sin affliction. They would also get a set of Jason's afflictions that let his powers bypass immunities. If they ignored the warnings and refused to leave, they would suffer damage that continued to multiply until it killed them and their body was erased from existence.

"That's quite harsh."

Jason could already feel the power affecting the ambitious intruders looking for plunder. They were rushing through the city, some searching the houses on the outskirts while others, largely the more powerful ones, rushed towards the pagoda they saw towering over the city. The new buildings were no more than two or three storeys high, so it was easy to see.

Waiting on the pagoda's roof, Jason returned his outfit to his inventory, calling his conjured blood robe and starlight cloak. Jason held out a hand, blood spraying out to accumulate into Colin's humanoid form. Looking like Jason minus the cloak, but with purple-red skin, he stood to Jason's left. Shade stood to Jason's right and Gordon also manifested, forming a line with the others as they awaited the gold-rankers, silver-rankers and ancient vampires running, riding and flying towards them.

"Shade, could you take the family down into the vault, please?"

"Of course, Mr Asano."