

Chapter 888

You Don't Want Glory

Jason and his familiars stood in a doorway that opened onto a blank void, serving as a private dock to the deep astral. Any cosmic visitors had to approach Jason's astral kingdom from elsewhere, as this was for his use alone. It had once led to the Cosmic Throne, but Jason had relinquished that link.

As they watched, a nebulous orange and blue eye opened in the dark. Motes of light, poured from it in a torrent, dancing sparks of blue, silver and gold. They swam through the void like a school of luminescent deep sea fish, lighting up the dark. Despite the appearance, they were not living things but shards of the fundamental substance that made up physical reality. First stolen from Earth's transformation zones, then consumed by vampires, Jason had subsequently sieved it from their bodies and taken it for himself.

"It is insufficient to complete your prime avatar," Shade observed.

"Yeah," Jason agreed in a dissatisfied tone. "I don't like my options for getting the rest of what I need, either. Having Rufus raid the factions on Earth for any reality core stockpiles would make things very hard for Grandmother, diplomatically. The messengers are made of the stuff I need, but they're all indoctrinated slaves. Killing them in a war is one thing, but I'm not going to have the team round them up and drag them into my domain for me to consume."

"There are more vampires on Earth," Colin said. "The clan has strong people now. They could grab vampires for you to eat."

"They could," Jason mused. "There's an argument that they're victims as well, but they're too far gone for any chance at redemption. But I don't want the clan doing something that predatory. I know I'm not great leader material, but I am responsible for them. Part of leadership is about setting a culture, and I want them to be better than me."

"You can't protect them from ever dirtying their hands," Colin said.

"No," Jason agreed, "but only if they have to. I don't absolutely need this from them, so I'm not going to send them off to kidnap things that think and feel, just so I can squeeze the life out of them and consume it."

"I agree that would be best avoided," Shade said.

"I have a suggestion," Gordon said. The sweet tones of his voice emitted from all twelve of the spheres he had at gold rank, making him sound like a choir of angels. It masked what Jason knew to be the familiar's nervousness at speaking. He was new to being understood by everyone.

“Please, share,” Jason encouraged.

“You gave something to the goddess of death once, as part of a bargain.”

Jason’s eyes went wide.

“That’s brilliant, Gordon,” Jason said. Gordon’s orbs dimmed bashfully.

“What am I missing?” Colin asked. He was in his blood clone form, looking like Jason but sculpted from wet, blood-red clay.

“I made a bargain with Death,” Jason said. “To swear off resurrection, for myself or anyone else at my hands.”

“I remember,” Colin said. “Really stupid choice. I can’t believe you gave away power like that.”

“We needed a miracle,” Jason said, “and we got one. I don’t bring it up to relitigate that decision, though. The point is that I had the power to resurrect at the time. I’d drained enough reality material from messengers to build myself a new body if I died. I gave it up to the goddess when I made the deal, but now that I won’t use it to come back to life, she may be willing to return it.”

“Do you think that likely?” Shade asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I probably got in her good graces by shutting Undeath down so hard. Can’t hurt to ask.”

Fiorella liked portal duty. A nice quiet room where nothing ever happened, and the best part: the chair reclined. For someone who enjoyed napping, it was the most coveted posting in the city of Rexion’s militia.

She had only been a girl when the old city fell, and had grown up in Rexion. She’d been in the crowd, sitting on her father’s shoulders when they had the big ceremony to name their new home. Her memories of those days were the hazy recollections of a child. Fear and hopelessness as the Builder cult, the messengers and then the undead came underground, one after the other. Abandoning their home. Hiding in some strange place her mother said was inside a man’s soul — that part still didn’t make sense to her — and finally arriving in their new home.

People had been scared. They had gone through so much; lost so much. Seen people and experienced events that were powerful, confusing and bizarre. It was hard to tell saviours from enemies, especially when one became the other. It had been one thing after the next, and when they arrived in the city, what no one expected was peace and safety. For some, it took years to accept. Some never did, ever wary for some unspecified cataclysm.

The city was no less strange than anything else they had been through. So empty, with how few Brighthearts were left. The buildings that turned into fog, reshaped themselves and turned into different buildings. It still happened occasionally, but it was all the time when Fiorella was still a child.

More people from the surface arrived, but these were neither foes nor saviours. They came not for war but for trade. The new growing chambers produced so much food, and the people on the surface were apparently very hungry. She heard stories of them facing their own messengers, who destroyed their surface growing chambers, called farms. They needed food and had much to offer in return. Most valuable was what the Church of Fertility could provide: children. In only a few years, the streets had been teeming with them, too many to raise as anything but a community.

The portal chamber had always been there, ever since the beginning. There were all kinds of stories about it. That it led to the place they had all sheltered in after fleeing the old city. That it was the inside of a person's soul. Fiorella's memories of being inside were patchy, just a few images and emotions. Mostly fear and loss.

The portal was only ever used occasionally, by Council Leader Lorenn or visitors from the surface. Then, a few years ago, it closed. When that happened, the militia started putting on extra people. There was talk of some invisible protection having gone away. While many didn't believe it, Fiorella did. Her aura senses were a little stronger than most Brighthearts and she had felt the change. Something that had always been there, without her ever noticing, was suddenly gone.

That had been Fiorella's impetus for joining the militia, but the results were not what she expected. For one thing, she turned out to have little talent for combat. She was trained to draw out her elemental powers, but she was never any good with them in the combat drills. She found her niche in the militia's logistics and administration divisions, cycling through a variety of duties in both.

No new threat ever came. Council leader Lorenn had been diligent in safeguarding the city without the vanished aura and its mysterious, unspecified protection. Through years of negotiation, the surface entrances to Rexion were now administered by the city, alongside some organisation from the surface. Fiorella had been assigned up there a couple of times, finding the open sky unsettling, but also fascinating.

Although she was no slacker, Fiorella's favourite duty remained watching the portal chamber. It was a room that looked to be made of sand-coloured brick and no decorations. At one end, by the door, was a desk with a very comfortable chair. At the other was the portal itself: a white stone archway. It was closed by the time Fiorella signed on, but she

had a memory of it from childhood. Swirling colours of blue, silver and gold. Pretty, but unnerving.

Now, Fiorella's work roster left her periodically assigned to watch that very portal. It stayed closed, nothing ever happening. Napping wasn't strictly allowed, but more than one superior officer had quietly mentioned that alternating good naps with good books was an acceptable way to pass the time. The large reclining chair behind the desk was not as comfortable as it was by accident.

Fiorella hadn't been on duty when the portal had opened again a little over a week ago. There had been a big hubbub at first, a group of combat militia replacing the one administrator in watching the portal. That hadn't lasted long. Council leader Lorenn had gone into the portal with a few of the city's elite veterans, returning quickly and removing the troops on her return. The role of watching the portal fell once more to administration and Fiorella was placed back on the roster.

It had been exciting for the first couple of days, despite the inactivity. She'd been briefed on all the people who might come out, and the ones who would inevitably visit from the surface. A device was set up in the corner so the sky network tablets would work through the portal. It looked like a lamp.

After being assigned, she sat behind the desk, imagining all the exciting things she might witness. The list of people who were likely to come through in either direction were apparently all famous up on the surface. Some of the names in that briefing list she'd heard in stories told by the older militia members. Stories she'd always thought were fanciful, but now she would get to see these people and judge for herself.

Two days into staring at the portal while almost nothing happened, the novelty had worn off. No one had arrived to go in, and one person had come out. When a priest of the Healer named Carlos Quilido emerged, she was bursting with questions. After one look at his stormy face, her questions died on her lips. He shoved a bundle of letters into her hands and went back without a word. If not for the briefings, she wouldn't have even known his name.

The only real difference after the portal opened was the silver, blue and gold light filling the once-empty arch. The colours weren't especially bright, but they did swirl around a lot, making it harder to nap. Not impossible, however, and Fiorella was roused from sleep by a gentle knocking on the table.

"Denny?" she asked blearily. "Is it shift change?"

"I have no idea. And my friends call me Jason."

Her eyes swam into focus as she sat up and looked at the man casually half-sitting on the table. He was a human, with a human face. It had hair on it. She wondered what a human was doing there.

Her sleepy brain finally caught up with what was happening and she almost fell bolting out of her chair.

“You’re him,” she said. “You are him, right? Sorry, Mr Asano, sir. That is you, right?”

She hoped the whimpering sound was only happening inside her head. This was the person they had talked about first and last in the briefing. The one who, should he emerge from the portal, meant she had to send a message to her superior and the Council Leader’s office. It was supposedly his soul on the other side of the portal that people could somehow live inside of.

“Um, I need to go tell people you’re here, sir. If that’s alright.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” he said. “You call me Jason instead of sir, and you can do whatever you like.”

“Uh, yes, sir. Jason. Sorry.”

He let out a chuckle. It was friendly, comforting sound. With everything that had been said about him, she was expecting some intimidating patrician figure. Instead, he looked like any human she’d see at the shaft market where most of the surface people shopped.

“Sir... sorry again. Jason. Is it true that your soul is on the other side of that portal?”

“That’s complicated, as you might imagine. But yes. How old are you? Early twenties? Old enough to have lived through all the trouble. You would have been a little girl when you and your people took shelter in there. I don’t imagine you remember much, or clearly.”

“No, sir.”

He smiled and shook his head.

“What’s your name?”

“Fiorella, sir.”

“It’s probably time you go tell someone I’m here, Fiorella.”

Her eyes went wide.

“Yes, sir!”

After she bolted out of the room, Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“Why did you ask her name when you already knew it?” the familiar asked.

“I don’t want to rub it in their faces that this place is my domain. This is their home. And it creeps people out when they know you can be — and probably are — watching them at every moment.”

“I don’t understand why people have a problem with that.”

“That’s because watching people from the shadows is kind of your thing.”

Council Leader Lorenn’s office was modest. She was seated not behind her desk but on one of a pair of couches, with Jason sat opposite.

“Again, Council Leader, I’d like to express my apologies for withdrawing the protection of my aura without warning, but I was always watching. I saw your efforts to protect your people, both militarily and diplomatically. You are a good leader.”

“I understand your reasons, Mr Asano. I might have had trouble believing them, had we not been through that transformation zone together. And while your aura may have gone, the infrastructure never showed the slightest indication of failure.”

“Fortunately, I didn’t have to take things that far for my ruse to work. Even if my identity had been eliminated, my power would have remained.”

Lorenn nodded.

“I won’t pretend to understand the nature of the battles you fight, Mr Asano. What I will do is apologise, in turn.”

“For what?”

“After the transformation zone, I was tired. Afraid to hope and quick to doubt.”

“That’s nothing to apologise for, Council Leader. My tribulations are meagre things compared to what you and your people suffered, yet I handled them with not a scrap of your grace and equanimity. You have nothing but my admiration.”

“Thank you, although you had little time to see past the façade. We all have our scars.”

“Don’t we just.”

“My point, Mr Asano, is that you were off and away before I even began to grapple with what you had left us. This place is a wonder. People I have met from the surface say that cloud vehicles such as yours are rare and precious things. An entire city of such construction is unheard of, even amongst the marvels of the surface world.”

“The surface world has no shortage of wonders.”

“I don’t doubt it, but this city stands amongst the best of them. The requests to come and study it have proven that.”

“Have you accepted any of those requests?”

“No. This is our city, but your power. I would not do so without your consent.”

Jason nodded.

“There is a person who I have somewhat accidentally dodged for most of two decades, now. They are a diamond ranker and created my cloud flask. I think letting them study this place would be fair compensation, so long as they don’t interfere with your people. Emir Bahadir will have their contact details.”

“Very well. But you keep deflecting from my topic, Mr Asano. After the transformation zone, I was bone weary. For so long, I had been putting one foot in front of the other, waiting for the next disaster. Always on watch for the next problem. Once I finally accepted that we have found safety, I looked back and realised just how much we owe you. It’s obvious, but I was too caught up to see it until you were gone. You are the saviour of the Brighthearts.”

“Many people were a part of this. Including you.”

“Not everyone carried my people in their soul, or fought a god.”

“If you need someone to build a statue of, Council Leader, then choose Gareth Xandier. He fought that god too, and it’ll look better anyway.”

“We did.”

“Oh.”

“Mr Asano, you sheltered us when we were lost. Not just kept our people safe but welcomed them into your very soul. Then you reclaimed our home and rebuilt it out of miracles. The ground we walk and the homes we live in are expressions of your power. This is the kind of story myths are made of.”

Jason leaned back into the couch and sighed.

“Then let it fade,” he said. “Myths are just old stories. Let me be that. If you’re going to talk about what happened here, don’t make it about me. That doesn’t help anyone. Talk about the people who came from the surface to help. That’s useful. Something that can build bridges. Let me be a footnote.”

“Why shy away from fame? From what I can tell, you aren’t short of it on the surface.”

“Maybe a while back. In certain places. But there are always new stories. New heroes. It’s been time enough that I can be just some guy. As much as any gold ranker can be. If I do something a little special, that’s expected of gold rankers. I won’t stand out like before.”

“I’m not sure that anyone but you believes that.”

“Call it a hope.”

“You don’t want glory?”

“I’ve had glory. It’s an empty thing. The time it cost me with my friends and my family are among my greatest regrets.”

“I feel like you deserve more.”

“Fame isn’t a prize, Council Leader. It’s a price. Surely you know that.”

Lorenn nodded contemplatively.

“Yes, I suppose I do. But surely there is something we can do for you.”

“Open a good sandwich shop.”

Chapter 889

The Power Looming Over Us All

Lorenn and Jason were on opposite couches. The setting was casual, but their discussion had the potential to shape the Brightheart city for generations.

“I respect that you have done what you can to give us autonomy,” Lorenn said, “but there are some issues that can only be resolved by you.”

“Religious issues?”

“Yes. You are, of course, aware of much of the political situation in the city. Many diplomatic and religious issues are settled outside of your domain, however. In one of the surface shafts, a town has been dug into the sides. It was placed just beyond the area of control because it was first excavated when the transformation zone was active.”

“People waited there for the zone to drop. I remember.”

“Since that time, it has been massively expanded. We call it Outer Rexion now. The statue of your friend is there. The population is mostly transitory. Merchants and diplomats from the surface. Most of the churches regularly cycle through their assigned clergy, as few enjoy spending so much time underground. Only those worshipping gods such as Earth, Stone and Deep seem to like it very much.”

“But their inability to situate temples in the city proper is causing issues?”

“Yes. The priests tell me that you hold dominion and the gods cannot encroach upon it with their power.”

“That’s correct.”

Lorenn gave Jason an uneasy look.

“It’s true, then. You have the power to refuse the gods?”

“It’s not as contentious as you make it sound. It’s true that I was mistrustful of gods when I first came to this world, but they’re like anyone else. You have good ones and bad ones. I know that isn’t news to you. Undeath is a complete prick, obviously, but some of the others have been kind and friendly to me.”

He scowled.

“And a little thirsty,” he grumbly added.

“Thirsty? Gods drink?”

Jason let out a chuckle.

“Never mind. Tell me about the ramifications of the temples being excluded. I’m assuming there has been some resentment?”

“There has. Not from the clergy, to my surprise. Their gods have apparently explained things to them and they’ve been quite understanding. The resentment comes from two sides, each presenting their own challenges.”

“One being external, I assume? People asking that if you’re refusing access to the gods, what are you hiding? Are the dark gods taking root here, far from the light?”

“Exactly. Even if the church officials and our diplomatic contacts understand, some people will believe what they want, regardless of the truth. Anger is easy to stoke, and those who would undermine our autonomy to exploit us are not shy about doing so.”

“That’s not unique. I come from a whole other universe and the same thing happens.”

“What do you do about it there?”

“Mostly give rich people everything they want and then claim that we didn’t.”

“How does that help?”

“It doesn’t.”

“Aren’t you rich?”

“Extremely.”

“So, you haven’t really done anything about it, then.”

“Don’t tempt me. I have this incredible urge to go back to my world and fix all the problems. I have wealth and power enough to reshape my home planet’s entire civilisation.”

“Then, why don’t you?”

“I’ve been watching you for years, and you’re a good leader. I am not. I have more power than any one person should, but not the knowledge, experience and wisdom to use it well. If I start instituting simple solutions to complex problems, I’ll do more harm than good. But I can’t just do nothing with it, either. When I act it has to be with caution. I need to rely on those with the knowledge and experience I lack. People like you. Even then, I’m going to stumble, and I won’t be the one suffering from unintended consequences.”

He sighed.

“I don’t know why you even asked me that. I’m not saying anything you don’t know. You’re a capable and experienced leader, where I’m just some guy who stumbled into vast cosmic power.”

“That is exactly why. I lead my people, but you are the power looming over us all. Our autonomy exists only so long as you allow it. You saved my people and built our home, but you could equally bring it all down on top of us.”

Jason frowned.

“I understand,” he told her. “I don’t like this power dynamic either. I preferred it when I could swan around, making jokes that no one understood but me. Now, I have to be careful with every word.”

Lorenn nodded.

“Such is the nature of leadership and the danger of power. I will confess to not liking the fate of my people being in the hands of an outsider. I find it easier to think of you as a god.”

“I’m not a god.”

“For practical purposes, you are. You have unassailable power. A domain upon which even gods cannot trespass. Gods that treat you more like one of them than one of us. When I think of you as a divine authority, rather than a person, it becomes easier to accept your role in our lives. But, as you say, you are not a god. It comforts me that you understand your power over us is not to be used lightly.”

“It doesn’t comfort me. I feel like a child who ate a spirit coin and could wreck anything they touch with their carelessness. All I can do is try to avoid doing too much damage while I learn about how to use my power — and how to not use it. If you are willing, I’m hoping that you and I could speak on this topic from time to time. I could learn a lot about leadership from you.”

“I am open to that.”

“Thank you. Now, speaking of leadership, let’s get back to specifics. I imagine there is some resentment amongst your own people at the exclusion of temples from the main city.”

“Yes. We did have priests and temples in the old city. They fell defending it, shielding the rest of us as we evacuated. We honour those memories. Many would like to join those churches, but the temples are in the part of the city built for outsiders. It is an obstacle for many, and excluding the Church of Fertility is especially contentious. We were brought to the brink of extinction, and they are vital to rebuilding our population. Many consider it disrespectful to keep them at a distance.”

Jason nodded.

“Now that the other claims on my spiritual attention have been completed, I can make some changes here. If I withdraw my dominion over certain parts of the city, the gods can claim them and temples may be built. Decide which temples you want built and where, and I’ll make it possible.”

“We’ll need to negotiate with the churches.”

“It’s your city, so I shall leave that in your hands. Let me know when you’ve made your decisions.”

“And if you don’t like my decisions?”

“It’s your city,” Jason said again. “It will take more than me disagreeing with you to intervene. I’m not saying I wouldn’t step in, but that would be an extreme measure. Anything that drastic is likely as repugnant to you as to me, like wanting to build a temple of Undeath.”

Lorenna scowled.

“Repugnant indeed. I would like some measure of where you see the line, however. There is no escaping the fact that you are the ultimate authority here.”

Jason nodded, staying silent for a moment as he thought about it.

“Here’s an example,” he said. “I detest slavery. That’s far from a unique position when even the meagrest scrap of empathy or decency will get you there. It’s a core value from the society I was raised in, and one that didn’t waver for me when so many others did. Many societies on the surface use an indenture system that is little more than slavery with a coat of paint. Rife with corruption and abuse and absent of consequence. The usual exploitation of the powerless. If your ruling council wanted to institute that system here, I would argue against it, repeatedly and loudly. I would not, however, stop you. It is not for me to tell your people how to conduct themselves. To a point.”

“At what point would you intervene, then?”

“If you implemented that system, it could easily devolve to a point that I can no longer tolerate the abuses. I could see myself stepping in, even knowing that doing so would have unintentional knock-on effects. If I judged that my intervention was worth the damage it would cause, I would act. But that would be a last resort, after failing to convince your leadership to shift course on their own.”

Lorenna leaned back into the couch.

“I can’t say I like the fact that you can come in and just change things, consequences be damned. But your reluctance to do so is more than I would expect for someone in your position.”

Jason nodded.

“Power and ideals are a volatile mix. I’ve managed to temper the latter as I’ve acquired the former. Hopefully to the stage where I’m not a complete disaster. I can’t promise that I won’t make mistakes, though. If anything, I can almost promise I will.”

“I think that we are discussing worst-case scenarios here,” Lorenna said. “You and I seem to share more values than we conflict upon. I don’t think that we can progress any

further on that at this time, so let's table that discussion and move back to practical concerns."

"Certainly. Please continue."

"There is a matter that is less urgent than temple locations, and perhaps affects you more than me."

"Oh?"

"There are priests staying in Outer Rexion."

"I would expect as much, given the temples there."

"It would be more correct to say that these are former priests. They are not here for the temples, but for you. They have been petitioning for residency in the main city. Thus far, we have refused them."

"They're here for me?"

"They came here because our city is a manifestation of your power. That isn't something we tell people, but more than enough know for it to be called a secret."

"What is their interest in my... wait. How much do you know about these people?"

"That they claim you saved them. That they have spent two decades researching you, because you spent most of that time dead or in other dimensions."

Jason groaned and ran a hand over his face.

"I think I know who they are," he said.

"What is their interest in you?"

"Centuries ago, there was a conflict. A cult to one of the great astral beings had a schism. A faction broke away, more interested in power and politics than the ideals they claimed to still follow. Common in the history of my planet, but we don't have gods stepping in to intervene."

"Are these people from that cult?"

"No. This splinter group overstepped and ended up being hunted down by a bunch of churches. A lot of people from those churches were trapped and held in stasis for centuries. I released them around twenty years ago now, but many didn't have anyone to go back to. Some had descendents, and others went back to their churches. But some gave up on their faith after their ordeal, or weren't accepted back. Purity rejected all of them, probably because the real Purity had been replaced during their entrapment. You heard about the events surrounding the god of Purity?"

"I did."

"My guess would be that these people are former priests, looking for something to follow. I'm mysterious enough that they don't realise how bad an idea it is to pick me."

“So, they’re priests of you?”

“No!”

“If I understand it correctly, this city is a temple to you.”

“No. I mean, kind of, yeah. But no.”

“Well, I’m going to leave them to you regardless.”

“Oh, thank you. I can’t wait to deal with that.”

“I can have them brought to the city immediately.”

“No. I’ll go to them, once I have an avatar that can leave my domains. And there’s one more thing we need to discuss.”

“Oh?”

“The old city had an astral space. The new one does as well, but I have kept it sealed.”

“Why?”

“When I formed the city, the interior of the astral space was, for some reason, outside of my control. Or, more precisely, it was too delicate. It was in an embryonic state, not reaching completion until much later. I didn’t understand why until I realised it was waiting for me to complete the transformation of my realm.”

“Embryonic?”

“Yes.”

“Suggesting something was gestating in there. Waiting to be born.”

“Yes.”

“Something you aren’t happy to tell me about.”

“It’s going to be complicated for you politically, should word get out. But this is your home and you deserve to know, so I’m going to show you.”

Jason floated through the air so high he was practically orbital. Lorenn was beside him and they were both shrouded in an orb of invisible mist. The planet below was utterly unlike Earth, equal parts beautiful and apocalyptic. Elemental forces so vast they could be seen from space clashed upon the surface. Hurricanes crashed into supervolcanoes. Earthquakes carved canyons so massive that they became seas as tidal waves filled them. It was gorgeous, wild destruction.

“I don’t even know how to understand what I’m looking at,” Lorenn said. “The sheer scale of it. I lived my life in a cave system even low-rankers could travel through in a day.”

“This the largest astral space I’ve seen. And I can see how planets might be an alarming concept to someone who had never been on the surface of one.”

“Why don’t things fall off the bottom?”

“Oh, I’m not getting into that. My friends will be arriving soon. Ask Travis Noble.”

“The astral space in our city wasn’t this large. Not even a fraction of this.”

“That’s one of the reasons it took so long to resolve itself. The other is the bit you aren’t going to like.”

“And what is that?”

The invisible sphere shot around the planet, chasing the sun. A shape crested the horizon as they moved, resolving itself into an impossibly tall tree, kilometres high.

“That is like the tree in the transformation zone,” Lorenn said.

“Yes. And more will grow here, in time. This is a messenger birthing planet, and the messengers that it births here are of the elemental type. It had been producing them for a few years now.”

Lorenn wheeled on Jason.

“Elemental messengers?”

“I understand your concern,” Jason said, then shook his head. “No, of course I don’t understand. But I comprehend why you and your people would feel only hatred for them. The end of your civilisation began with elemental messengers. You naturally and obviously don’t want them in your city, so I sealed this place away.”

“You should destroy them.”

“They’re children, Council Leader. And they aren’t the ones that destroyed your city. They aren’t corrupted and mindless. I’m only showing you this place because the aperture to this realm is in your city. I don’t see a reason for your people to ever interact with it, but I’m not foolish enough to assume it will never happen. I wanted you to know so you weren’t blindsided should its existence ever become public.”

Lorenn stared out at the planet below and the towering tree.

“I will need time to come to terms with this, Asano.”

“Of course. I’ll take you home.”

Chapter 890

The Topic of Pants

There were two shafts leading into the Brightheart city. One had been dug upwards by elemental messengers, and that had become the main shaft. The other had been dug down by regular messengers. It was now heavily fortified, even though the messengers on the surface were gone.

In that second shaft, Jason's avatar floated in the air, at the very edge of his domain. There was a Brightheart fortress on the spot and Jason was hovering in front of a wall that sealed the entire shaft. A woman appeared in front of him, just outside his area of control. She had plain, stark features, pale skin and dark hair. She wore a simple grey dress with a faded blue flower pattern.

"You want something from me," Death said.

"I do."

"Is a temple of my church in Brightheart territory conditional on getting what you want?"

"No. This is one thing and that is another. Your miracle helped save them. It put to rest their fallen who had been perverted into macabre creations. If they want to worship you for that, or even simply be grateful, I won't get in the way. To do so because you refused to give back something I already traded away would be petty."

Death nodded.

"Such would be unbecoming at our level. I will return what was taken, Jason Asano, now that it cannot be used for its original purpose."

She held out her hand and a sphere appeared over it, shimmering blue, silver and gold. Jason reached out to touch it and it vanished.

"Thank you," he said.

"Thank you for stymieing Undeath. The greatest opportunity to enact his purpose in centuries was quashed because of you."

"It took a lot more than me to stop him, and he accomplished far more than I would like."

"We share this view. But we must accept that we did all we could, and celebrate that it was more than what was likely. In immortality, there are no absolutes in victory or defeat, especially over time. People live and die. Civilisations rise and fall. There will be a time when even this planet will be gone, and we gods with it, yet you will remain. You are so

very young for an immortal, and some things, only time can teach. But you will learn them, whether you like it or not.”

“I suppose I will. Thank you, Death.”

“Thank you, Jason Asano.”

The pair vanished, and the Brighthearts watching from inside the fortress allowed themselves to breathe again.

The creation of the prime avatar was a surprisingly unspectacular affair. The reality material taken back from Death was added to the swarm of lights in Jason’s void and they coalesced into a body, floating naked and hairless in the dark. Jason stood at the doorway to the void in a basic avatar, along with his familiars.

“You should make some tweaks,” Colin suggested, pointed up and down at the body. “You could change that part.”

“You just pointed at the whole thing,” Jason said.

“I know where I was pointing.”

“You do realise you look exactly like it?”

“Yeah, but I make this look good. It’s about how you inhabit the body. Gravitax. You wouldn’t understand.”

Jason gave his familiar a flat look.

“Don’t feel bad,” Colin said. “I just happen to have a primal hunger that the ladies respond to.”

“Are you getting interested in women?”

“Ick, no. Wait, do I get to eat them?”

“No!”

“Then definitely not.”

“Please don’t go around eating women.”

“You’re saying that I can eat men?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I said okay,” Colin insisted while Jason stared at him with suspicion.

“Colin.”

“Yes?”

“You can’t eat gender fluid and non-binary people either.”

“Oh, come on. It’s like you don’t want me to eat anyone.”

“You can eat monsters.”

“What about people who attack us? You want me to not help in fights until I make sure they aren’t on the list of things I’m not allowed to eat?”

“Look, if it comes to a fight, you can... nibble.”

“Nibble?”

“Yeah. Nibble.”

“So, I can eat bits of people?”

“Bad people. In a fight.”

“That sounds like a double standard.”

“It’s about context. It’s like how, in everyday life, I don’t get to stab people. But in a fight, I’m allowed to stab people. So, when we get in a fight with people, that’s when you’re allowed to, you know... eat them a little bit.”

“So, if I start a fight, I *can* eat people?”

“No starting fights. And if a fight does happen you can only eat them *a little bit*. No fully eating people.”

“Not ever?”

“Maybe if they’re already dead. And they really sucked. Or it’s really important you rebuild your biomass immediately.”

“This is all too complicated,” Colin said. “It sounds like you’re making it up as you go along.”

“That would be accurate, yes,” Jason acknowledged.

“See, this is the problem,” Colin said. “The ladies like me because I’m definitive in my actions. If I want something, I eat it.”

“Please stop saying ‘the ladies.’”

“One of us should,” Colin said, pointing to the avatar floating in the void. “You clearly need some help, physically. Maybe reduce the chin a little.”

“The chin did reduce a little.”

“And there’s that much left? How many rank ups will it take before you have a normal person’s face?”

“You have the same face!”

“You need to grow back that beard. Do you still have some of Jory’s hair growth cream?”

“Look, I just took the template for my body and adjusted for normal gold-rank changes. It will work better as a seat for my consciousness if I don’t go messing around with it. And it’s more an ointment than a cream.”

“Mr Asano,” Shade interjected. “Could I, perchance, make a request?”

“Of course,” Jason said. “What do you need?”

“For this conversation to end before all two-hundred-and-eleven of my bodies decide to destroy themselves rather than continue listening to it.”

Jason looked at Shade from under raised eyebrows.

“It might be time to get started, yeah.”

Jason’s basic avatar vanished. The prime avatar floated out of the void and through the doorway. As its feet touched the catwalk, it opened its eyes. Jason’s consciousness settled into it, turning it from a thing into a person.

Jason felt the spiritual noise fade away as he inhabited his new avatar. For years he’d been dealing with an awareness of every action of every person in every domain he possessed. Louder were the countless people across the cosmos connected to the System. His perception of them was sealed away, lest it destroy his mind at his current level of power, but it was a cosmos worth of muted mumbles.

His perception of his domains and the System were still accessible, should he have need of them, but they weren’t pressing in on him. The prime avatar was like a quiet room in a busy house; the noise couldn’t get in until he stepped outside. For the first time in a long time, Jason felt like a relatively normal person.

He held out his hands and stared at them as he flexed his fingers. When he rubbed his hands together, he smiled at the sensation.

“A real body,” he said. “It’s still an avatar, I know, but it doesn’t feel like one.”

“Fingers aren’t all that,” Colin said. “I went without fingers for years, and I turned out fine. Can we go eat something now?”

Jason chuckled.

“Sure, buddy. Let’s go get some lunch.”

“Can it be people?”

“No! We just talked about this.”

“Can we be flexible? How about if I eat a crappy person.”

“What did I just say about eating people, Colin?”

“Wash them first?”

“I’m pretty sure I said don’t.”

“Then can we go have a fight? You said I can eat people when we’re fighting.”

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “Perhaps before we engage with the topic of lunch, you should engage with the topic of pants.”

A spherical cloud plunged through the upper atmosphere, dropping from a space station shaped like Jason's head. Flames ignited around the cloud from the friction of their rapid passage, but the cloud was unaffected. Inside the cloud it was cool and stable. Jason, in his new avatar body, relaxed and enjoyed the ride.

"I need to deal with the things inside my realm first," Jason told Shade. He was reclining in a cloud chair while Shade stood primly beside it. Colin and Gordon were eagerly watching the dancing orange light that filtered through the wall of the sphere.

"I would have thought you would rush outside your domain," Shade told Jason.

"I want to, and that's why I haven't. I've been in here so long that, once I leave, I'll keep finding excuses to not come back. Carlos has gone pretty stir-crazy as it is, and I should prioritise his work in any case. It can help a lot of people. Maybe even some of the vampires on Earth."

"I counsel keeping your expectations measured, Mr Asano. Even if he is successful, in developing a treatment for vampirism, it will only work on lesser vampires. Those who have had the curse forcibly inflicted upon them. That is not common on Earth. The vampires there have always been cautious when propagating their own kind. They make ghouls and blood servants rather than lesser vampires."

"I know," Jason said softly. "It's just that so many have died, or been bled out in those horrifying farms. It makes me wonder if I should have stayed and fought."

"No, Mr Asano. I can confidently say that if you had stayed, you and the vampires would have ultimately entered a race to see who could inflict the worst atrocities on the other. I have no doubt you would have won against the vampires, but it would be the Earth that lost. Be it you or the vampire queen, the world would be ruled by a monster."

"Yeah," Jason agreed. "I guess leaving was best."

"And humanity must be allowed to resolve its own challenges."

"Do you ever get sick of being right, Shade?"

"I have made my own mistakes, Mr Asano. You just don't notice with the frequency and magnitude of yours."

Colin utterly failed to smother a laugh while Gordon's giggle was the sound of a trickling stream. Jason shook his head at the abject betrayal of his familiars.

As their descent continued, Jason pulled up his character sheet. Looking over his abilities, he smiled at the effects of using great astral beings to grind levels. His abilities ranged from the third to fifth level of gold rank, and for the first time, his perception power wasn't the highest, if only by a slim margin.

His cloak power was integral to the way he fought, even the way he moved. It had become a part of him and he felt exposed without it. But while he had no shame in his chuuni ways, spending all his time in a cloak made of darkness was too edgelord for even him.

The cloak was also the opposite of incognito. Now that Jason could disguise his magic eyes as normal ones, many activities would be a lot easier. Something as simple as going into a bakery and buying a pie would be less hassle if his nebulous eyes were hidden. A void cloak that was blown by dimensional winds would undermine that significantly.

The biggest change was that he had left the identity of an outworlder behind. Originally, his character screen had listed his race as a formerly human outworlder. It now said 'nature' instead of race, calling him a 'prime avatar of an astral nexus.' He wasn't sure if dropping the term 'race' meant he was now beyond mortal classification, or if the system had gotten more politically correct.

Was it an internal change, based on his nature or changing sensibilities, or something more external? Social change was slow in Pallimustus, but rapid in many parts of Earth, especially the ones Jason dealt with. Was the system reacting to changing values? He decided to put the question to Shade.

"The System is clearly tied to you, Mr Asano, but also to the cosmos at large, now. As such, I am not sure anyone other than you could determine the truth. If I were to forward a hypothesis, it would be that 'race' is a term you took from games on Earth and cannot adequately represent the breadth of individuals it now needs to. As such, it has taken the broad term 'nature' to represent the nature of people across the cosmos."

"That makes sense. I've still got the six powers that used to be racial gifts. They seem a bit OP, if I'm being entirely honest."

"Mr Asano, your transcendence, incomplete as it is, has taken the form of an astral nexus. While this is not something I am aware of from experience, it seems clear that what you are a nexus of is astral kings, great astral beings, and gods. The three supreme entities of the cosmos. You may be lacking in capabilities compared to each — often significantly so — but your power reflects aspects of all three. As your prime avatar is a direct embodiment of that power, were you expecting any less?"

"That's fair, I guess."

"And you should not underestimate the abilities of others. What may seem unassuming at first may prove more powerful than you realise. Look at the abilities of Mr Standish. His gifts focus on knowledge and magic. Not overtly powerful, but in playing to

his strengths, they led him down a certain path. Imagine if he had more generic abilities that did not make full use of his astounding mind. If he used special attacks instead of spells, like most humans. Would he be a middle of the road adventurer that no one had ever heard of, or a Magic Society official in a backwater branch? What of the knowledge he used to stop the Builder from initiating his invasion years early? Would he have spent the years of your absence devising a method to repair the link between two universes? You change worlds, Mr Asano, but so does he. Without him, you would have failed many times, and it was his inherent abilities and their evolutions that set him down that path. Just as you do for you.”

“That’s definitely true. My abilities almost seem disappointing when you put it that way.”

“I am disappointed in the one that allows me to turn my shadow bodies into transport. Now that it allows Colin and Gordon to alter a vehicle I create, I just know they’re going add...”

The shadow creature shuddered.

“...colours.”

Jason Asano

- Nature: Prime Avatar of an Astral Nexus
- Current rank: Gold
- Progression to diamond rank: 29.5%

Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Gold 3]
- [Speed] (Dark): [Gold 4]
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Gold 3]
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Gold 3]

Inherent Gifts

- [Prime Avatar]
- [Numen]
- [System Administrator]
- [Sacred Phoenix]
- [Relics of the King]
- [Palanquin]

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (5/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Gold 5] 19%
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Gold 5] 28%
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Gold 4] 88%
- [Hand of the Reaper] (special ability): [Gold 4] 86%
- [Shadow of the Hegemon] (familiar): [Gold 4] 88%

Blood [Power] (5/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Gold 2] 17%
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Gold 4] 76%
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Gold 4] 09%
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Gold 4] 67%
- [Haemorrhage] (spell): [Gold 4] 63%

Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Gold 4] 59%
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Gold 2] 58%
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Gold 2] 56%
- [Hegemony] (aura): [Gold 5] 16%
- [Castigate] (spell): [Gold 4] 40%

Doom [Spirit] (5/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Gold 4] 66%
 - [Punition] (spell): [Gold 4] 04%
 - [Blade of Doom] (spell): [Gold 2] 99%
 - [Verdict] (spell): [Gold 4] 12%
 - [Avatar of Doom] (familiar): [Gold 4] 72%
-

Chapter 891

Butchery

Jason didn't need to fly around in a sphere or have Shade turn into a vehicle to get around his realm. But after years of being what amounted to a disembodied spirit in landscapes that were more metaphor than reality, he was enjoying the feeling of limitation. And, by alerting Carlos of his approach, the priest had the chance to prepare for an event he'd been working towards for more than fifteen years.

Carlos had been conducting his research inside Jason's soul realm because here the fundamental rules of reality could be altered. Pain, damage, even death itself could be suspended. He had been using that cheat to advance his research in ways that would otherwise be illegal, unethical and lethal. But, while Jason's avatars had been helping, making those changes at his direction, there was only so much his avatars could do without Jason's direct intervention. But now, with Jason's return the next big step could be taken.

Now that Jason was no longer distracted, he could give his full attention and focus to Carlos and his work. He let Shade glide him over the streets of Arbour as a black skimmer. The roads were collections of rocks set out in wide pathways, less surfaces to drive on than navigation aids for the winding routes through the tree city.

The current residents were all high-rankers who could provide their own — usually flying — transportation. For the future, large constructs of living wood were scattered throughout the city. Shaped like buses, but on legs instead of wheels, they would provide a public transportation system, not just able to navigate the roads but also climb the larger trees of the very vertical city. While inactive, as they were now, they could sink their root-legs into the ground to absorb nutrients, or climb high into the trees for more sunlight.

Shade's black skimmer was free of colour. Allowing Colin and Gordon to influence the vehicle would add defensive properties, but in Jason's astral kingdom, the greatest threat was something they could not guard against: a cranky shadow familiar.

The vehicle slowed to a stop at a large stone building, set on the ground between a trio of massive trees. A group came out to greet Jason, comprised of Carlos, Cassin Amouz and one of Jason's avatars.

Cassin Amouz had arrived within hours of Carlos giving a letter to the desk attendant in Rexion, stationed outside the portal to Jason's kingdom. A portal courier saw that the letter reached Rimaros with haste and another portal brought Cassin to Yaresh. His gold-

rank speed allowed him to reach the shaft and descend with swiftness, now that it was largely safe.

Cassin was heavily invested in Carlos' research, both literally and figuratively. He had poured the considerable wealth of his family into it, in hope of saving his son. Gibson Amouz had been held in magical stasis for years, and even then might have passed away without Jason's realm turning off death itself. He had been caught midway through an elaborate corruption ritual by the inaptly named Order of Redeeming Light.

Saving Gibson was Cassin's goal, but for Carlos it was a first step. What they learned in doing so would hopefully lead to purging other dreadful afflictions, beyond even the most powerful essence abilities. Cassin had provided every resource necessary for Carlos to save Gibson, and pledged to support his research perpetually if successful.

The avatar melted in an instant and flowed through the air as a liquid of red, black, blue and orange. Jason extended a hand and it was absorbed into his body. Absorbed with it was the knowledge and memories the avatar had acquired in more than a decade as Carlos' assistant. Jason blinked a few times as he processed everything the avatar had seen, done and learned working for Carlos.

"You've been at this for a long time, Carlos, and I see from my avatar that you wasted none of it. I'm guessing you'd be happy to not stand on ceremony and just get to it?"

Relief showed in Carlos' entire body as a nervous tension left it. Rather than respond, the Healer priest turned and went inside, waving at Jason to follow. What came after was lengthy and complicated. The interior of the building had a hospital's sterility, nothing like the earthy scents and warm colours of the autumnal city outside. The operating theatre was filled with specialised tools, many developed by Carlos in the preceding years. Dominating the room was a tank where Gibson Amouz was floating, upright and unconscious.

The original research assistants were long gone, replaced with a slew of compliant avatars. They didn't even have Jason's appearance, the way the one he absorbed had, let alone any of his personality. These were simple dark figures, like bland copies of Shade, but each bearing a single nebulous eye on their heads. Carlos liked them because they were precise, tireless and silent.

The process of saving Gibson had more in common with surgical procedures of Earth than traditional Pallimustus ritual healing. Carlos had developed a method of causing all the tainted magic in Gibson to physically manifest, then cut it right out and off of his body.

It was grim, visceral work, with Carlos, Jason and the avatars being painted in blood and gore. A gold-ranker might have survived the process, but only Jason eliminating the

concept of death and pain allowed Gibson to make it through. Finally, the corrupting magic was excised and Carlos used more traditional magic to restore the boy's savaged body.

Cassin Amouz watched the entire process, hour after hour, with unflinching resolution. When all was done, Carlos ran every test he could to determine Gibson's condition. Declaring there was nothing left but to wait for Gibson to awaken, Carlos led Jason out, leaving Cassin with his son in a recovery room.

Carlos and Jason staggered, exhausted, into crystal wash showers. They had burned through and recovered astounding amounts of mana over seven hours of intense ritual magic and painstaking pseudo-surgery. Elaborate sigils carved into flesh with painstaking precision. Mana carefully channelled through devices designed and built by Carlos himself in his research.

They stumbled out of the building in fresh clothes and fell onto a wooden bench in front of the stone building. They took in the evening air, cool, fresh and earthy. Even Jason's prime avatar was strained by a sequence of interlocking rituals more intense and extended than anything he had done before. He did recover much faster than Carlos, however, drawing on the power of his kingdom.

"This is just the beginning," Carlos declared with weary satisfaction.

"I hope you learn a lot from this," Jason told him.

"I believe I will," Carlos said. "I had every measuring tool that could even potentially be useful in there, and a few I invented myself. But there is a long way to go. The next step is refining the procedure. This crude butchery that relies on the local god to alter reality is an unsustainable approach."

"I'm not a god, Carlos."

"You suppressed the very concept of death."

"At most, I'll accept god-adjacent."

Carlos turned to look at Jason.

"You haven't noticed, have you?"

"Noticed what?"

"How long have you been wearing that special avatar of yours?"

"Well, that took about seven hours, so, eight or nine hours."

"I've worked with your avatars for a long time now, Jason. They are a bland lot, for the most part, but I've become familiar with the linguistic quirks they've inherited from you. The way your translation power handles turning your language into mine. This new avatar isn't speaking my language."

“It’s not?” Jason said, listening to his own voice. He’d become so used to his mouth using myriad languages it had become background noise. When he concentrated now, what he heard was English.

“You’re speaking a language that my mind says is mine, but isn’t. I have enough control over my perception to recognise that it’s not my mind understanding you but my soul. It’s how gods sound.”

“That’s not good. I can mask my eyes now, so it’s easier to buy pies, but now you’re telling me voice is all weird?”

“It’s not that it sounds different. If anything, you sound more natural than ever. I suspect that people are going to hear their own language from you, whatever language you use.”

“Like when gods speak to people.”

“Exactly. It’s like there’s a power infused into your words. Not aura, exactly, but something similar. I’m not sure how to describe—”

“Authority,” Jason said. “I suspect the word you’re looking for is authority.”

“Yes,” Carlos said, nodding. “That’s the word.”

Jason shook his head.

“That might be a problem,” he said. “I’ll have to see what I can do about suppressing it, but it’s one more thing on the list at this stage. Training never stops does it?”

“Not if you’re doing it right,” Carlos said with a chuckle. The apparent success of his procedure after so many years of build up had transformed the tense man into a languid puddle.

“What now for you?” Jason asked. “Refining the procedure, obviously, but what’s the next practical step?”

“Assessing young Gibson. Getting as much information as I can from him. I need to monitor his recovery closely and make sure it’s complete. As for the procedure, I have two goals. One is removing the reliance on you, and the other is having the procedure work on the fully converted, not just someone halfway through the process of corruption.”

“How long until you’re confident of working on someone fully affected by the Order of Redeeming Light’s ritual?”

“You’re thinking of Miss Wexler’s mother?”

“All of them. While those we know matter to us, we have to keep sight of the wider implications. The greater good we can accomplish.”

“I am glad you’re not short-sighted in this. While my goal is to escape reliance on your soul realm, it remains a valuable asset in the short term.”

“You should know that I will be taking my astral kingdom away in a little while. I’ll be returning to my homeworld for a time, and I will need my prime avatar to open doorways to it.”

“That wasn’t an issue before.”

“The rules are different now. Very different. The portals I established before were to a hazy half-reality. This place is only a pocket universe, but it is a universe, complete and whole.”

“That is unfortunate.”

“Possibly not. Much of what we did today was reminiscent of how medicine works on Earth, where I come from. I don’t imagine there will be a lot of direct crossover, but there might be a lot for you to learn there.”

“You would take me?”

“I intend to take a lot of people. Seeing an entire other universe is a rare opportunity, perhaps especially so for you. My world has an entirely different medical paradigm, not to mention a very large number of vampires. Your ultimate goal is a cure for vampirism, is it not?”

“Lesser vampirism, yes. Those who have accepted it into their souls are beyond any intervention.”

“I have some things to settle here, before I set out. But you can work on the other victims here while we travel. How long will it take for you to consider using this process on those fully affected by the Order of Redeeming Light’s influence?”

“I can do it soon, if they’re willing to accept a butcher job like this one. I want to use those procedures to make the process less aggressive.”

“And therefore survivable outside my kingdom.”

“Precisely. How long that takes depends on how much we get from today’s results. We need to see how Gibson progresses over the next few weeks. I’ve been preparing for this for a long time, and I won’t squander this opportunity by rushing things now.”

“Let’s try and get the Redeeming Light victims sorted out first, then. I have some things to do before I head for Earth, so you’ll have time to assess Gibson and decide if you want to join me. I genuinely think there are things for you to learn there and you’ve been working for so long, with so much focus. You could stand to clear your head.”

“Arabelle keeps telling me the same thing.”

“And she’s right. But I recognise how important this work is. I want you to know how much I admire what you’re doing, and why you’re doing it. I’ve saved quite a lot of lives as an adventurer, but I’m famously the guy with the evil powers. I have one cleansing power,

and even that kills my enemies. The only solutions I have to offer come in the form of violence and horror. You're doing something that will help people heal from some of the worst things that can be done to a person."

"I'm a priest of the Healer. It's my duty."

"Duty will take you far, Carlos, but this is well past that. I know you've been through some things. I don't know what they are, but I'm sure they're a part of what has made you so driven. That doesn't change the fact that you are doing something amazing here. Something good."

"Good enough that you'd put a temple of the Healer in the Brightheart city? Even before the portal shut, I wasn't going to church very often. It was too far away for me to leave the work that long."

"Actually, Carlos, that's already in the works. If it's been a while, you might want to go say g'day to your god, though. He might think you've ghosted him."

"My god does not think I've abandoned him."

"I don't know, mate. Someone doesn't hear from you in a while, they start to worry. Get insecure. Did something happen to Carlos? Is he alright? Has he been hanging out with other gods? I knew I saw him looking at the temple of Lust, and he says he wasn't, but I know what—"

"With all due respect, Mr Asano, please go away."

"Fair enough."

Chapter 892

Just Some Guy

As he walked the short distance between Carlos' research centre and the portal leading out of the astral kingdom, Jason contemplated what Carlos had said about how he sounded when he spoke. He drew up his character sheet and looked over the 'inherent gifts' his prime avatar possessed, replacing his old outworlder abilities.

Inherent Gifts

- [Prime Avatar]
- [Numen]
- [System Administrator]
- [Sacred Phoenix]
- [Relics of the King]
- [Palanquin]

It would take time to fully explore these new abilities, but they were easy enough to categorise. He'd lost very little, with most of his old capabilities consolidated into his new ones, with extra powers on top. It was certainly enough to make up for the first of his new abilities doing almost nothing, from a practical perspective.

Prime Avatar was little more than the ability to have a prime avatar, offering neither combat nor utility powers. It was possibly his most important ability long term, however. The prime avatar would allow him to advance the aspect of his power that was still mortal and ultimately achieve full transcendence.

The Sacred Phoenix ability combined powers previously gained from the World-Phoenix and the Death goddess. Palanquin was the closest to one of his old abilities, allowing Shade to take on travel forms and his other familiars to modify them.

The three remaining gifts each seemed related to a different kind of transcendent entity. System Administrator, unsurprisingly, represented Jason's relation to the System now affecting essence users across the cosmos. His role in that was akin to that of a great astral being, but most of his control was sealed away until he reached full transcendence. Until then, he would have to settle for his prime avatar having a suite of System related abilities.

Relics of the King allowed him to tap into his soul forge, astral throne and astral gate. His prime avatar couldn't draw on them as powerfully as his previous mortal body could, but it would suffer little to no backlash for doing so. He would no longer be wrecking himself for months after using them.

The last inherent gift, Numen, was an overtly divine power, and the one Jason focused on.

[Numen]: Your transcendent power has aspects of divinity that are imbued into the avatar that is the mortal embodiment of your will and power. Your avatar can express that power in ways that reflect your hegemonic and defiant nature. Traits and abilities your avatar inherits include: establishing spiritual domains; Akashic Speech; stripping and transforming remnant magic from magic entities you have killed or destroyed; being immune to rank suppression as well as detection, tracking and assessment magic; negating aura-related abilities by fully suppressing the aura of the ability's user.

Shade emerged to float alongside Jason as he walked, looking at the system window holding Jason's attention.

"Priest Quilido is right, Mr Asano. That your power is partially divine in nature is not a question but a fact."

Jason focused on the Akashic Speech aspect of the ability.

Help: [Akashic Speech]

Akashic Speech taps into the fundamental interconnectedness of all things in the cosmos to communicate in a way that is intrinsically understood by all things capable of communication. Despite the term 'speech,' this ability impacts all forms of communication, and is perceived by all entities in the form most natural to them. Full use of this ability is only capable by transcendent entities. Mortal limitations limit the effectiveness of this capability.

"Mortal limitations limit the effectiveness of this capability," Jason read. "Limit it by how much, do you think?"

"I imagine that any entity capable of something you would recognise as language would be covered, Mr Asano. Even extreme cases, such as communicating through telepathy, scent or colour coding, so long as the mentality behind it at least vaguely operates as a language. I suspect that only that which is wholly alien to you, not just in method but in mentality, will fall outside of that ability."

"So, it's basically a new version of my old translation power, bundled up with some of my other abilities and given a god polish. Collecting up my old abilities and giving me more seems a bit cheaty, even if the Prime Avatar ability is a dud, power-wise."

"We have discussed this already, Mr Asano. Even simple powers can have formidable results."

“I know. How much do you think that adding some god sprinkles to my powers will stand out? Do you think I can suppress it?”

“I think it will largely go unnoticed, Mr Asano. Your voice and your aura will be the most evident, so the effects on those will be what you need to suppress. I am afraid, however, that anyone sufficiently powerful or attentive will notice, unless you completely retract your aura and don't speak. As the former is not practical, and the latter isn't possible, I'm afraid that anonymity will be difficult. On the positive side, that's not much of a change.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Mr Asano, the Adventure Society crafted an entire new identity for you and you immediately revealed it to almost everyone you met.”

“There were extenuating circumstances.”

“Such as not being bothered to try very hard?”

“I didn't say they were good circumstances, just extenuating ones. Look, I'll probably be able to suppress the god taint to a degree, right?”

“Taint, Mr Asano?”

“I can't let myself treat being a bit goddy as a good thing. Next thing you know, I'll have eighteen wives and a gun stockpile in my wilderness compound. Rick Geller probably thinks I already do.”

“I will refrain from dignifying that. As for the question of suppression, the aura aspect will be easier to mask. You are well trained in that regard. Hiding the way you speak will be harder. Although people will hear your words in their native language, it is possible for those with strong control over their perception to recognise that you are actually using the old language.”

“The old language?”

“It has many names. The divine tongue. The words of creation. You have been using it for years. The name of your sword is engraved on its blade in that language. Your Mark of Sin ability burns the ideograph for 'sin' into people in that language. I suspect using that language is a key aspect of the ability.”

“You didn't think to mention that I was talking in some ancient god language?”

“I had assumed it was an aspect of your previous translation power. That ability allowed you speak in the languages of those around you, and you have been speaking primarily to great astral beings. It also happens to be my native language.”

“I suppose your dad is a great astral being. This speech power is going to make it hard to be a face in the crowd, even if people do hear it as if I’m talking in their native tongue.”

“Yes. With your old power, you were actually speaking the languages, so you could only use one at a time. Now everyone will hear you in their own language. If people notice that different members of a group are perceiving the same words in different languages, that will certainly stand out. The only solution I can see, Mr Asano, would be to start learning languages and not use the Akashic Speech. I think, however, it may be time to embrace that you are not, as you said, ‘a face in the crowd.’ I suspect that more of your nature will be evident once you leave your own realm, suppressed aura or not.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Your prime avatar is something akin to a hole in the universe. A channel between this realm, which is your true self, and that body. An ambassador, if you will, of a place without limits. Here, in your astral kingdom, your avatar belongs. Once it enters a normal universe, it will be a living expression of infinite and alien power. A gate to something beyond mortal constraint. To most, it might seem like the normal presence of a high-ranker. And I imagine you will be able to mask your presence through aura manipulation, as before. But to anyone paying attention, there will always be indicators.”

Jason sighed.

“I liked being just some guy. And I know that I haven’t really been that in a long time, but it’s about more than just what I am or what I’m caught up in.”

He tapped his forehead.

“Up here, I’ve always been some guy, caught up in crazy cosmic forces. I know that, at this point, I am the crazy cosmic forces, but I don’t want to let go of that part of myself. It feels like that sense of being an ordinary bloke is all that’s keeping me grounded to what I was. That if I let that go, however much of a fiction it is now, I don’t know what I’ll become.”

“As someone who has lived for an extremely long time, Mr Asano, I have some bad news: change is inevitable. You will not be the man you are now in a million years. In a billion. The key is to not think in millions of years. That is how great astral beings think, and they need mortals to do their short-term thinking for them. Your ability to inhabit a moment is your strength. It’s why the World-Phoenix sent Dawn to you. It’s how you won the battle for the Cosmic Throne. Trust yourself, Mr Asano, and those of us who stand beside you.”

“Thank you, Shade.”

“Of course, Mr Asano. It is best that we had this talk now, before you take your prime avatar outside.”

Jason looked ahead to the portal they had almost reached, standing in a clearing.

“This is going to be a whole thing, isn’t it?”

“You may be forgetting, Mr Asano, but it always is.”

The crowd of people was skittish, ragged and malnourished. They looked around, hunched and twitchy as if expecting an attack. Nigel watched, frowning at their condition as Asano clan members led them off, accompanied by the rest of Nigel’s team. Nigel himself walked in another direction, alongside Rufus.

“Every time we liberate one of those damn blood farms,” Nigel said, “the condition we find people in still gets to me.”

“Thank you for helping us with this one,” Rufus said.

The Asano clan had inherited what remained of the military infrastructure left behind when the bases in their territory were abandoned. Much of it had been destroyed during the vampire’s tenure, but what remained included a number of intact or salvageable vehicles. The blood farm victims had been brought to the clan in military trucks and would be housed in military dormitories for the immediacy. The dorms were cloud constructs, so more luxurious than they seemed at a glance.

Nigel’s team and the clan members moved the blood farm victims while Nigel and Rufus headed for a more modest vehicle that would return them to the city.

“How many farms were left running while the Asanos were hiding in their magic hole?” Nigel asked bitterly.

“It was an unfortunate necessity,” Rufus said.

“Necessary for what? What is worth all the suffering we could have stopped?”

“A battle on a scale you and I could never fully comprehend. Stakes than span not just this universe but countless others, on a time scale of trillions of years. If you want more details, ask Jason when you see him next.”

“He always used to talk about saving the world. I was never clear on what from, and now you’re saying he’s moved on to saving the universe?”

“This world almost broke apart like a biscuit in a cup of coffee. He stopped that from happening. Barely. As for his latest battle, again, ask him yourself. He’ll explain or not.”

They reached an open-top military Jeep that looked like it was from the eighties.

“They weren’t using vehicles like this at the military bases,” Nigel pointed out.

“This one was created by the domain,” Rufus said. “It’s made of clouds.”

Nigel looked it over warily as he climbed into the passenger seat. Despite looking like old, cracked leather, it felt impossibly plush. Rufus smiled at his startled expression and

started up the vehicle. The military base was set away from the city proper, but not too far. It would only be a short drive through the countryside.

“You sound critical for someone who says he’s looking to join our clan,” Rufus observed.

“I’m not looking to join anything until I know what I’m leading my people into,” Nigel said. “The good and the bad. Then we can decide if we want in, and they can decide if they want us.”

“I can respect that,” Rufus said. “I can tell you a little about how the clan works, if you want to hear it.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“The first thing you should know is that we don’t work with traditional money. The coin of the realm here is either spirit coins or, more commonly, clan contribution points. You can exchange either for regular money at the clan exchange, along with most other luxuries.”

“Luxuries? What about the basics? You’ve been isolated for years.”

“We’re self-sustaining for the basics. The astral spaces provide plenty of food and water. We have some sizeable farms in there now. As for infrastructure, the land itself provides. Every clan member gets a home, and it’s all made of clouds. It adapts to your needs. You can even just ask it and it’ll change.”

“Tell me more about those clan contribution points.”

“Everyone gets what they need in terms of food, lodging and other basic needs. Free public transport, free healing. Simple clothes. No one has to wonder where they’ll sleep that night, or where their next meal is coming from. But it’s all basic. The fundamentals of living a life. Anything more requires contribution points. A nicer home. Nicer clothes. A jet ski. Going out to a restaurant.”

“And how do you get these points? Fighting monsters?”

“If you like. And you’re qualified. But points are easy to earn. Maybe you’re the one who makes those nicer clothes, or works in that restaurant. Training, too. We have a school for ritual magic. A training centre for those who do want to fight monsters. All the essence users have to go through a basic program there. Children accrue points for their families by attending school. Enough that they can afford essences when they’re old enough to use them.”

“You sell essences for these points?”

“We do. Jason left us a significant supply, and we collect more in the astral spaces.”

“How expensive are they?”

“The costs for the common ones we collect ourselves are minimal. The high-rarity ones that Jason left behind that don’t manifest in the territories here are the most expensive.”

“How many of the clan members are essence users?”

“Almost all. Basic essences are inexpensive enough, and there are many excellent yet affordable combinations. A few people hold out, saving up for more expensive essences. Some don’t like the idea of changing themselves with magic, although they are very much a minority.”

“Health, long life and no longer needing the bathroom are strong motivators.”

“Indeed they are. Still, some refuse, whatever you tell them. Especially now that the combinations are becoming less reliable.”

“Less reliable?”

“The previously fixed essence combinations are starting to add variety to the confluence essences they produce. The same combinations no longer get the same result every time. It’s been escalating here for a while. Haven’t people noticed in the wider world, yet?”

“Maybe. My connections aren’t what they were.”

“But you do have them. Someone sent you here.”

“Anna Tilden. You know her, right?”

“We’ve met.”

“I need to settle up with her. We came here for a job, and it’s only right we finish it before we look at joining your clan. Assuming you’ll have us.”

“That’s up to the Matriarch. And it’s not my clan, as such. I’m more of an honorary member. Formally joining would complicate things with my family back home. Our position is complicated.”

“Does an honorary member get contribution points?”

“Yes, if services are rendered. Your participation in the blood farm liberation will earn you and your team some as well. If you don’t end up joining the clan, I would suggest exchanging them for spirit coins or Earth currency.”

“You can trade points for money?”

“Yes.”

“Not all of my members are completely sold on my plan of joining the clan, but I think you just turned a couple of them around.”

[Prime Avatar]: A prime avatar is a physical and spiritual gestalt that serves as a mortal anchor for transcendent power. It does not have a soul of its own, serving as a vessel through which your soul can be expressed, fully embodying your consciousness and mortal power. The power of your avatar is limited to your mortal power and serves as a means to grow that power. As the anchor for your transcendent power, the prime vessel is required to exert certain aspects of that power upon physical reality.

[Numen]: Your transcendent power has aspects of divinity that are imbued into the avatar that is the mortal embodiment of your will and power. Your avatar can express that power in ways that reflect your hegemonic and defiant nature. Traits and abilities your avatar inherits include: establishing spiritual domains; Akashic Speech; stripping and transforming remnant magic from magic entities you have killed or destroyed; being immune to rank suppression as well as detection, tracking and assessment magic; negating aura-related abilities by fully suppressing the aura of the ability's user.

[System Administrator]: Gain access to all aspects of the system, along with additional interface features such as maps, voice and image chat, party and raid group functionality, and the ability to assess creatures and objects. You can grant these additional features to others in a party or raid group. You can access the system interface of others if you have their permission or have suppressed their aura.

[Relics of the King]: Access the astral throne, astral gate and soul forge to limited degrees. Reinforce the stability of dimensional spaces through your presence and transgress sealed or unstable dimensional apertures. Exceed the normal limitations of portal abilities at the cost of additional mana, potentially suffering backlash for extreme expenditure. Use your aura to suppress spiritual manipulation and suppress or enhance soul attacks.

[Sacred Phoenix]: Soul-based abilities learned prior to astral nexus transfiguration have been refined for use by your prime avatar. Afflictions can also add [Ghost Fire]. On suffering damage that would be lethal, transform into a ghost fire phoenix. After ghost phoenix transformation is triggered, it cannot be used again for one year. That time is reduced by absorbing life force, and further reduced by life force containing fundamental reality material.

[Palanquin]: Your dark essence familiar can transform its bodies into one or more forms of transportation. These forms can offer luxury and utility but are relatively fragile for their rank. Your blood familiar can reinforce any single form, enhancing its durability, allowing it to repair itself rapidly and heal anyone inside with moderate efficacy. Your doom familiar can add offensive and defensive capabilities any single form.
