

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.”