

Chapter 421

No Perfect Options

Jason was resting up before moving to claim one final territory. He was not far from the house containing the family he had rescued but he was giving them space to come to grips with their extraordinary circumstances. He was in the backyard of a nearby house, reclining in a cloud chair. The sky was a clear blue circle over his territory, encapsulated in a ring of endless night.

“There is something of a resemblance to your personal crest,” Shade observed.

“It kind of does,” Jason said, holding a hand out, palm up. An image of the crest tattooed on his back appeared over it. It was a night sky filled with stars and shadowy, indistinct figures, surrounding an empty cloak. Within the cloak was a bright, daylight sky.

As essence users entered the higher ranks, they reached the point of affecting the world around them outside of their essence powers. At silver-rank, this was mostly just a power to levitate that helped their increasingly heavy bodies walk on weaker surfaces or even water, but it was easily disrupted. Relying on it in combat or to arrest a high fall was ill-advised.

Those silver-rankers with a magically-induced personal crest could also project it, which had even less practical purpose. It did not obviate the need for the simple ritual that tested the crest against existing records for identification purposes.

Jason closed his hand and the image vanished.

“I should get to it, I guess,” he said. “I’m worried about what will happen. Maybe I should open it up and get some gold-rankers in here. Maybe they could do more.”

“Or perhaps the corresponding increase in response from the transformation zone would bring disaster,” Shade countered. “It would match their power, escalating the threat without tipping the balance in your favour.”

“I know. I’m just second-guessing myself.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“I’m not so certain. The price of my failure here is higher than ever and I’ve made mistakes before.”

“You’re adventurer, Mr Asano. Get up and go do your damn job.”

Jason sat up, giving his shadow a surprised look.

“That’s not like you, Shade.”

“It’s what you needed to hear, Mr Asano. Left to your own devices, you tend to flounder. You lose direction, becoming uncertain and second-guessing yourself. I do my best but I am glad Miss Farrah was sent to help.”

“Yeah, I owe your dad for that one.”

Jason got to his feet and the cloud chair dissolved into mist, which seemed to be drifting down his body to gather around his feet, like a fog-based water feature.

“I should talk to the family about leaving first. Give them time to prepare themselves for what happens next.”

“Are your underpants on fire?” Nikoleta asked as she met him in the front yard of the house her family was staying in.

“No,” Jason said and the mist shroud he hadn’t bothered to dismiss was drawn to the miniaturised flask hanging from his neck chain. “We should talk.”

“It would be best if it were just you and I again,” Nikoleta said. “My grandparents are very religious and they’ve seen and heard things about you that make them wary.”

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “Shall we walk?”

They set off along the street, down a footpath of lightly-coloured tiles.

“What happened to your eyes?” she asked.

“Um, I don’t know. Shade?”

“Your eyes have changed again with your gift evolution,” Shade said from Jason’s shadow. Nikoleta looked around a little nervously at the voice.

“I quite liked the silver,” Jason said. “What is it now?”

“A shifting mix of gold, silver and blue. It is reminiscent of your transcendent damage abilities.”

“Shifting?” he asked.

“The colours are in a constant state of change,” Shade said. “Also, the structure of your eye had changed. You no longer have irises or pupils. They are just coloured orbs, now.”

That wasn’t hugely startling, given that the eyes of essence users were one of the first aspects of their bodies to move past human limitations. As a result, eyes were the most common part of the body on essence users to undergo visible physiological changes.

“Does it look cool?” Jason asked.

“I think it would be better if they were black,” Shade said.

“Look who I’m asking. Nikoleta, what do you think?”

They shared a look as she examined his face.

“It makes you look a bit... inhuman,” she said, then self-consciously touched her face next to her own eyes. “Not that I can say anything.”

All of her family now had eyes and hair in a uniform shade of metallic brass, although the texture of their hair felt normal.

“I’m sorry,” Jason said softly. “With the life I lead, it’s easy to overlook how overwhelming all this is when you first come to it. You have many strange things to come to terms with and it’s only been a day. Did you sleep?”

Nikoleta nodded.

“After the initial shock wore off, we all became very exhausted. And those beds are so comfortable.”

“Yeah,” Jason said with a chuckle. “They’re nice.”

He gave her a comforting smile.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but I’m afraid your family’s ordeal isn’t done quite yet. I’m going to go off and claim another area of territory, see if I can’t find any more people like your family. Then I’m going to bring all this to an end and take us out of here.”

“What happens then?” she asked.

“I honestly don’t know,” Jason admitted. “As far as I know, what’s going on here has never happened before. I’m just doing my best to save the world without breaking anything it can’t do without. Right now, we’re inside a giant dome, despite the sky above and all the land stretching out around us. My best guess is that when the dome comes down, this little city, town or whatever it is will stick around and the rest will go.”

“What will happen to us?”

“You see that tower?” Jason said, pointing to the pagoda, the top of which could be seen over the three and four-floor story buildings in the centre of the city. “We’re all going to be safe in there.”

He managed to avoid adding the word ‘probably.’

“I don’t think your farm will be back but that’s far from the extent of your problems. Your family is a part of a unique magical event, which means that a lot of people with power will want to study you.”

“Study?”

“Yeah. Best case scenario, they lock you up in a room somewhere and run every test known to science. Then a few that aren’t.”

“And the worst case?” she asked.

“It’s probably best if we just focus on avoiding that.”

“How?”

“People trying to grab me is pretty much the default position, so I was already going to do a runner. Now, we just all scarper together. Assuming you want to. If you want to take your chances with whoever is out there, I can send you out of this place before I do anything.”

“What about after we run?”

“There’s a couple of options. One is the place my family lives in Australia. Unless very serious people take a very serious run at it, you’ll be safe there. It would be better if we could have you disappear into the population somewhere, but the changes you’ve gone through are hard to hide. The alternative would be to sneak you into a more ordinary transformation zone, one in a populated area. The Network is taking all those people in, so you could mix into the crowd. If you got found out, though, you’d already be in the hands of people you maybe don’t want to be.”

Nikoleta didn’t respond after he finished, staring thoughtfully at the ground as they walked.

“There are no perfect options, I’m sorry.”

“You have already helped us. We are not your responsibility.”

“Yes, you are,” Jason said. “When I was in a situation not that different from yours, I made the choice to be an adventurer. I don’t know how that translates into Slovak but it means that when there’s some crazy-dangerous magic and some innocent people, my job is standing in between it and them.”

“You’re speaking Slovak right now,” Nikoleta pointed out.

“I know, right? I have to practise to keep a handle on the whole translation thing. I was talking to this guy who was looking at me like he had no idea what he was saying. Turns out I got set off by his Kanji wrist tattoo and I was talking to him in Japanese. Which he didn’t speak. He was just kind of a tool bag.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Jason left Nikoleta to discuss things with her family and headed out for the next territory. Shade’s helicopter form landed close to the border of Jason’s spirit domain and he looked out into the gloom beyond. It looked like another cityscape, but even from just the darkened silhouettes, he could tell it was quite unlike the one he had already claimed.

He crossed the border and moved into the dark territory. He couldn’t see far but two things became quickly apparent. One was that the city seemed very industrial in design, not just in the metal and concrete construction but the design aesthetic. Metal plates and heavy bolts; he half expected to see a giant steam piston.

The other aspect immediately apparent was that the city was long abandoned. Decades of corrosion and weathering had left the concrete pocked and crumbling, the asphalt potholed and every building a rusted husk.

“Find anything?” Jason asked. Shade had been spreading out his bodies to search the border areas as Jason explored at a measured and cautious pace.

“Nothing more than you,” Shade reported, “but I believe I know the world that this territory was based upon.”

“Seriously? The original Builder based Earth and Pallimustus on already extant worlds but that was the better part of thirteen billion years ago. I know you’re old but not that old, right? Any planet would be massively changed in that time.”

“I know it because it was one of the first worlds the new Builder plundered. It was a dead planet, so the other great astral beings allowed the Builder to break it apart and take what he wanted as part of the pacts by which they moderate one another. The Builder came to regret the concessions it made to the World-Phoenix for this, which is why it has become more circumspect. Now it plucks sufficiently stable astral spaces off the side of reality rather than trying to dig inside a reality and dismember worlds entirely.”

“He used to strip whole worlds?”

“Only dead ones, which turned out to be a poor beginning for his ambitions. When he used parts of dead worlds as the basis for the one he was constructing, it was like implanting dead flesh into living. There was a taint of death, pervading even the magic, forcing the Builder to seal away those parts of his constructed world.”

“Sealed away how?”

“Sealed in time. Not locked away but frozen and unchanging. Anything altered by external influence simply reverts to the state it was at the moment the seal was put in place. A perfect quarantine.”

“I knew time manipulation was possible,” Jason said. “Danielle Geller’s confluence essence is time, but her scope is very limited, even at silver rank. If she gets to diamond, will she be able to time travel?”

“Only forwards,” Shade said. “Time can be sped up or slowed down. One can move forward, vanishing and then reappearing at some point in the future. Affecting the past, however, is impossible. Even the Keeper of Moments, the great astral being that governs time, cannot do such a thing.”

“Well, you say that, but your dad is the ferryman of the dead and he’s not above occasionally sending someone back.”

“It is not so for the Keeper. The past is inviolate.”

“Probably what he told you,” Jason muttered.

“Getting back to the matter at hand,” Shade said pointedly, “I believe it likely that the enemies in this place will consist of constructed life. A variation of undead that, like vampires, use life-force injected into the unliving to create a facsimile of life.”

Most undead were simply corpses turned into a mockery of life by death energy, while vampires used stolen life force to largely replicate the function of a living creature.

“Are we talking some kind of artificial vampire?” Jason asked. “How would an artificial vampire work? Like cloning?”

“I don’t believe it will be vampire variants. I do know that what you call magitech on your world was quite advanced in this one, but my knowledge only goes so far. I was not in the Builder’s constructed reality for an extended time.”

“You’ve been there?”

“I have. As you know, I have been a familiar several times. One of my summoners sought out knowledge from a universe that had reached its end long ago. The only place the knowledge potentially remained was in fragments of the universe taken from it by the Builder quarantined in time.”

“Must have been really important information,” Jason said. “Like a really good sausage recipe.”

“No,” Shade said. “It was not a really good sausage recipe.”

“Oh, wow,” Jason said. “A really, really good sausage recipe. Nice.”

“I believe this conversation has officially scraped the bottom of the barrel,” Shade said. “Perhaps it is time to start expanding your domain.”

“Yeah,” Jason said unhappily. He was worried about the outcome of his final territory claim, given that he didn’t want to risk using his most powerful weapon again. The core launcher had become noticeably warped when fighting the boss of the last territory. He was not willing to risk it blowing up in his hands unless he had no other option.

Returning to the border of his domain, Jason claimed the first stretch of the next territory. As a precaution, he started by using the minimum number of stable genesis cores to claim the minimal area.

As his territory expanded outwards to reveal the broken city, Jason smacked his lips thoughtfully.

“Do you still have that sausage recipe?” he asked.

“It was not a sausage recipe.”

“I could go a good meal right now. I mean, that fruit you picked was nice but I’d rather enjoy taking a sausage in the mouth.”

“Please don’t be juvenile, Mr Asano.”

“You think it’s beneath me to say?”

“No, Mr Asano. It is beneath me to listen.”