

Chapter 342

All I Can Do is My Best

Jason walked down the single street of the dilapidated, West African township. Buildings of clay brick and rusted, corrugated iron were silent and the streets empty. The only people he could see were amongst the tents set up at the far end of the town, where people in hazmat suits were bustling about. They had too much to do, too few people to do it and too little to do it with.

He made his way down the dusty street, the heat pounding down like a blacksmith's hammer. It wasn't until he drew close to the tan tents, set up in neat rows that the busy humanitarian workers noticed him. A hazmat-suited woman rapidly approached and started yelling at him in French.

"What the hell do you think you're..."

She trailed off as she met his eyes, seeing their silver colour.

"Are you him?" she asked.

"Yeah," Jason said. "Who are you?"

"Dr Chloe Baudrillard. What do I call you?"

"It's probably best I don't leave a name. It's one less thing when people come asking about me."

"People are going to come asking?"

"Once you see what I can do, that won't seem strange."

"I've heard the stories. From people I trust, but it doesn't seem possible."

"A place like this could use a little impossible, don't you think?" he asked.

"You're damn right it could. If you can do what they say..."

"I can. But only for as long as people don't come looking for me," Jason said.

"I was told that keeping quiet was your rule but I can't promise that we can stop people from talking," she said. "All I was told was to give you whatever you need and stay out of your way. But as I said, people talk, and I've heard about the man with the silver eyes."

"I'm not looking to build a legend," Jason said. "I'm just looking to help people. The goal is to do as much good as we can for as long as we can, right?" Jason asked.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, it is. So what do you need?"

"Some privacy and all the sick people you've got."

She led Jason forward, but after a short distance, he stopped.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

"I need to see someone," he said. "Go to where I need to be and I'll find you."

She frowned, turned to look at the tents and then back to Jason but he was already gone.

"What the... does he think he's Batman?"

Elsewhere in the camp, Jason stood outside a tent and let a little of his aura show. Shortly thereafter, another hazmat suited woman appeared, this one with a bronze-rank aura.

"So you're here," she said.

"Yes."

"You realise that the Network isn't exactly slacking off on this, right? We are helping. We just aren't making a spectacle of it."

"I respect that," Jason said. "We're both working in secret, only at different points on the scale. The simple fact is, secrecy is costing lives."

"If the secret comes out, you think it will make things easier once the world descends on us?"

"This isn't a hospital full of camera phones and media saturation," Jason said. "We have leeway here and we should use it."

"You think we don't want to march through here, raising people up off their sickbeds? We have to look beyond today, to the next outbreak and the next one. Plus, there's only so much mana to go around."

Jason plucked a wooden box out of the air, sliding off the lid to reveal stacks of bronze-rank coins.

"Would this help?"

The woman didn't answer for a moment as she looked at the coins, then shook her head as if to clear it.

"You're willing to just hand these over?"

"You want some iron ones as well? Actually, give me a list of everywhere I can find Network personnel working on this and I'll make some drop-offs."

"That very generous," she said. "It doesn't change the fact that what you're doing puts us all in jeopardy."

"You could look at it as a safety precaution," Jason said. "if anyone latches on to your activities, you can pass it off as the work of the magic healer roaming around."

"It's not as simple as you make out," she said.

"It never is. All I can do is my best, based on what I know and what I can do."

"Well," she said. "I don't like what you're up to but it's not like I can stop it. And I am going to take these coins."

Jason walked into the large tent, Chloe beside him in her hazmat suit. There were people laid out in rows, letting out a discord of feeble moans.

"Are you sure you want to see?" he asked. "Once you do, you'll never see the world in the same way again."

"You think I should choose ignorance?"

"As a rule, no, but it's not so easy to pick up your regular life after peeking behind the curtains of the universe."

"Just do what you came here to do."

"Alright," Jason said.

Jason moved to the first patient, who was agitated and delirious. The man's aura was in chaos and Jason used his own to guide it back to calm. After months of practising, his aura control had eclipsed his abilities of the past.

From Chloe's perspective, Jason's mere presence calmed the man, lulling him into sleep. Then it passed through the room like a wave, the pitiful moans dropping away. Then Jason raised his hand, speaking words in a language she didn't recognise.

Red light started glowing from within the patient and Chloe's attention was transfixed. Looking at the light felt like looking at the man's beating heart, although it was stained with black taint. As she watched, the taint seeped out of the light, streaming up into Jason's waiting hand. It only stopped once the red light was clean, at which point it retracted into the man's body. Still unconscious, the patient looked immediately better.

Chloe looked on in disbelief as Jason went through the patients, one by one. He didn't so much as glance at her until he had gone through every patient.

"You have more tents, right?"

Despite their misgivings, the aid workers had cleared out to let Jason loose on the patients after getting implausible but emphatic word from other camps. Now that he was gone, they were swarming over the patients, running tests multiple times out of raw disbelief. Chloe suspected that she herself was in some stage of shock, the unreality of it all being disorienting. She hadn't run tests to check the results of the strange man's actions but every instincts told her that the stories she heard were true.

"What you did in there, I can't explain," she told Jason at the edge of the camp. "It looked like you were healing people with a magic spell."

“It did, didn’t it?”

“You were right,” she said. “I’m not sure how to just move on after what I saw.”

“I imagine you’ll be busy in the next little while. By the time you have a chance to stop and think about it, you can just pass it off as some weird trick.”

“I don’t think that’s going to work. Not if you really cured those people. Was that you in Sydney, last year? Healing all those kids at the hospital.”

“I try to be more circumspect, now, but...”

They both turned to look at the frenzy of activity in the camp.

“Sometimes people just need helping,” she said.

“Yeah,” Jason agreed.

“Are you going to more camps?”

“Of course.”

“I won’t keep you, then,” she said. “There’s no shortage of people that need you.”

He narrowed his eyes at her.

“You’re really not going to ask, are you?” he said.

“Ask what?”

“You know what.”

“You can tell?”

“I can feel it in your aura.”

“Oh, my aura.”

“You just watched me heal the sick by casting spells, but auras are where you draw the line? I’m not talking about the aura photographs you can get in a new age shop.”

Jason let his aura gently brush against hers, another example of his new level of delicacy. He was unable to hide the intrinsic properties of his aura when projecting it in such a way, however. She felt the domineering nature of his aura power, Hegemony, along with the unyielding resolve that came from all that his soul had endured.

“So that’s you,” she said after recovering from the strange sensation.

“There are more jokes than my aura might imply.”

“I think it’s time for you to go,” she said.

“Why didn’t you ask me to heal you?”

“You’ve given us miracles enough. What’s a little cancer next to what these people are going through? I can go home and do all the chemo I like. All they can do is lay there and hope not to die. You should be moving on to more of them.”

Jason gave her a warm smile and held up a hand, repeating the chant in the language she didn’t understand.

As with the patients before her, her red life force was brought out, cleansed and returned to her. She felt like a fresh breeze had just passed through her whole body.

“You’re a good egg, Chloe Baudrillard.”

He plucked a pen and notebook from thin air, scribbling a note and tearing out the page before handing it to her.

“You’ll be busy with this for a while, but when you’re done, come find me. I’ll show you how to heal in ways you never imagined. You do want to do what I just did, right?”

“You’re saying I could...”

“Some variation on it, yes. If I show you how.”

She looked down at the paper in her hand.

“Jason Asano,” she read.

“That’s my name,” he said. “I’d appreciate you keeping it under your hat.”

She looked up from the paper, her eyes searching his face for answers.

“Why me?”

“Because you didn’t ask,” he said.

A black UTV, something between a quad bike and a car, was moving along a road of red dirt, between vibrantly green bushes and trees. The man in the driver seat was not driving but instead narrating to the recording crystal floating over his head.

Losing power due to low levels of ambient magic was a problem for magic items, especially weaker and cheaper ones like recording crystals. Fortunately, Jason’s inventory was able to replenish the depleted magic of objects, so long as Jason himself wasn’t mana-starved. Since his transfiguration, Jason’s more spiritual nature meant that he no longer needed spirit coins to keep his magic levels up, or even consume them for food, so that was not an issue. The steady trickle of power from the astral he now enjoyed sustained him both physically and magically.

“You could use a non-magical recording solution,” Shade suggested as Jason put the recording crystal away.

“Recording crystals adjust to the movement of the vehicle so there isn’t a jiggled image,” Jason said.

“Are you suggesting my suspension system is insufficient?” Shade asked.

“Not in the least,” Jason said. “This is as comfortable a ride as I could hope. As always, Shade, you excel.”

As they continued on, a magic item on the passenger seat began glowing with silver light and made a low hum. It looked something like an oversized compass.

“It’s not even two o’clock and this is the second one today,” Jason said, picking up the device. The grid compass was something Farrah had devised after digging into the nature of the Network’s detection grid. There was some resistance to giving her access from certain elements of the Network, but that changed as sections of the grid started experiencing failures. At that point, Farrah became a valued part of a multi-branch investigative task force.

When it started happening, Jason had offered to return immediately.

“Not wanting to seem rude,” Farrah said, “but you won’t actually be able to help. This is an array magic thing and you just don’t have the expertise.”

“The grid involves astral magic too, right?”

“Yes, but the astral magic part works fine. It’s the bones that need looking at. Not everything is about you, Jason.”

The grid compass alerted Jason to proto-space formations in the vicinity by tapping into the grid. At the pivot-point of the needle was a crystal that glowed different colours, according to the strength. Smaller crystals gave a rough indication of distance by how many lit up.

“Seventy clicks,” Jason said. “Silver rank, too.”

The UTV pulled to a stop and Jason got out, returning the charging plate to his inventory. The vehicle transformed into a cloud of darkness, most of which disappeared into Jason’s shadow. The remainder took the form of Shade.

“My supply of coins is getting low,” Shade said. “I’ll need more if we’re going to fly.”

“Ask and ye shall receive, my friend,” Jason said, producing a box of coins. He had no shortage since he was interceding in proto-spaces at least once and often two or even three times daily.

He was leaving behind the bulk of the silver-rank loot for the locals and satisfying himself with bronze-rank spoils, which made for exasperated responses from local Network branches, but no actual complaints as he randomly showed up in their proto-spaces unannounced. Not since leaving China, anyway.

“Actually,” Jason said, pulling a completed recording crystal from his inventory, “take this too, please.”

Shade put the coins and the crystal in his own dimensional space. It was significantly smaller than Jason’s but could be accessed through any of his bodies. This meant that Jason could send his recording to his niece via Shade. She sent him back gifts in return, like biscuits she made with her mother.

Shade then took the form of a new vehicle, an ultralight trike. Basically a seat with a motor behind it, with glider wings over the top, it was also black with a few white embellishments.

"I'm not sure black is especially safety-conscious," Jason said.

"I could transform into a regular tricycle instead," Shade said.

"No, this is good," Jason said.

Using the road as a runway, they were soon soaring over the landscape. Seventy kilometres would be roughly a half-hour trip.

"I know its probably time to be looking towards heading home," Jason said, enjoying the wind flowing over him. "I'm having an absolute blast, though. I would love to bring Erika's family on a trip like this. Minus the monster-slaying and horrifying misery of the plague camps, obviously."

"You have responsibilities, as vaguely defined as they are, right now," Shade said. "I believe that Dawn will eventually contact you again for further explanation, and the failures in the grid are an increasing concern. The two factors may not be unrelated."

"I was thinking the same thing. I don't want to leave while this outbreak is still ongoing, though. It's nice to use what I can do to help solve a non-magical problem that affects so many people. It's exactly what I imagined back in Greenstone."