

## Chapter 444

### Which One of Us is the Villain

Jason's latest territory finished transmuting.

- 
- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
  - Territory has been renamed [Geo-Thermal Metropolis].
  - Anomalies attacking as a result of further spirit domain expansion will have increased power.
  - You have claimed sufficient territory to stabilise the transformation zone and separate it from the convergent astral space.
  - Separating the space with the current territory will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the surrounding reality. Claim additional territory to reduce the severity of this effect.
  - Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?
- 

"No."

Jason rode the elevating platform down from the top floor of the pagoda, stopping to pick up Mr North on the way.

"Your eyes have changed yet again," Mr North said as they walked across the atrium to the front doors. "What are you doing to them?"

Jason turned his new eyes on Mr North.

"Would you like me to show you?"

"Do you always talk like someone from a nineties action movie right after you've gotten a new power, Mr Asano?"

Jason blinked, nonplussed.

"I think I do, yeah," he realised. "Still a chuuni, I guess. Greg would be happy."

"Greg?"

"My friend. Gerling killed him. You know; the guy you want me to put aside my differences with to work together."

"You need to do it, Mr Asano. You don't need to like it."

They went outside, to the driveway that looped around a fountain. A group of the celestines were outside, starting up at the top of the pagoda. Jason and Mr North followed their gazes, spotting a giant nebulous eye floating in the air over the pagoda.

"Mr Asano," Mr North said. "I thought we were clear on which one of us is the villain."

"We are."

"One of us has a giant eye at the top of their tower at the heart of their realm."

"It's not the Eye of Sauron," Jason said.

"It looks like the Eye of Sauron."

"Well, it's not."

"I am not familiar with the Eye of Sauron," Shade's voice said from Jason's shadow.

"I told you to read Lord of the Rings," Jason said.

"I got as far as Tom Bombadil and then read Remains of the Day again, instead."

"That's fair," Mr North said.

"Yeah," Jason conceded. "Shade, what is it with you and butler fiction?"

"Why would I want to read about elves and wizards?" Shade asked. "Do have any concept how many elves and wizards I've encountered over the millennia? Butlering is a noble profession of duty, dignity, professionalism and composure, where elves and wizards can and do conduct themselves in whatever disgraceful manner they care to. I've seen where you scratch yourself in public, Mr Asano."

"Are you ever going to let that go? It was one time and no one was watching."

"It was at the symphony, Mr Asano. A place for culture and comportment."

"It was my private box."

"That is not an excuse to scratch it."

"That's not what... You know butlering isn't a real genre, right?" Jason said.

"Given many of the 'real' genres," Shade said, "that is hardly an indictment. I am not responsible for the literary failings of your planet, Mr Asano."

"Are you two always like this?" Mr North asked.

"Let's just go," Jason said. "Shade, a pair of ultralight trikes, if you please."

"Of course, Mr Asano. I will carry out this duty with dignity, professionalism and composure."

"Sounding like a butler doesn't make you a butler. They have special schools."

"That is not an absolute requisite," Shade said. "Also, I took an online course."

"You took a butlering course online?"

"It wasn't ideal," Shade acknowledged. "In-person attendance wasn't viable."

"Did you pay for that with my money?"

"Managing expenses appropriately is a core duty of household staff, Mr Asano. When was the last time you even checked your bank account?"

Jason ran a hand over his face.

"Can we just go now, please?"

Darkness sprang from Jason's shadow and took the form of two powered hang gliders with three-wheeled seats, ready to run down the long palace driveway and take off.

"Can't we just use a helicopter?" Mr North asked.

"Just be happy there isn't a sidecar," Jason said.

\*\*\*

Jason's latest territory had been a network of underground caverns woven amongst deep canyons of red and yellow rock. After the transfiguration, it was a futuristic city primarily located underground but also settled on the surface which remained primarily barren and rocky. The exception was the previously desolate canyons which had become lush gorges, rich with plants fed by the rivers running through them.

The bottom of the gorges were thick with the spray of rushing rivers and humid from the source of geothermal energy that powered the underground city. The walls of the gorges had building emerging from them all down the sides; glass-fronted homes offering spectacular views.

Jason and Mr North descended into the city via elevator, finding the public spaces of the underground sections quite cavernous.

"Is this the kind of place that turned up in the other transformation zone?" Mr North asked.

"More or less," Jason said.

"It's quite remarkable. Quite eerie, though, being desolate of people."

"It is, a bit, yeah."

"This region alone has to be larger than the dome covering the area in the real world. Do you think it will all be collected into an astral space again?"

"I don't know," Jason said. "The rules by which this transformation zone operates are a little different to the last."

"Oh?"

"It could be because the zone is mixed with a permanent astral space, instead of a proto-space. It could be that last time I had to slowly develop the power to truly imprint myself on the territory. This time I walked in with it, which seems to have changed things from the start."

"Do you think it has changed things for the others? Gerling, the vampires, the necromancer."

"You know how you do something one time by accident and then you know everything about how it works?" Jason asked.

"Point taken, Mr Asano. What now?"

“I want to get a sense of this territory before I expand into the next one. With each new territory I claim, they grow stronger. If they’re too strong, we’ll want to fight a retreating battle, bleeding them as we go. Knowing where to retreat will be important.”

“It won’t be a problem if the anomalies come here?”

“It will gradually reduce the size of the newly claimed space, but grabbing less of it at a time is better than losing it all. The completed territories, like this one, won’t be under threat unless we let the anomalies attack the pagoda at the centre. If we reach that point, we’re probably done anyway.”

“Meaning the world will be done with us.”

“Yes,” Jason said.

“How exactly do we expand territory?”

“Telling you that doesn’t seem like the greatest idea in the world.”

“I was just curious, Mr Asano, not ambitious. I won’t push.”

\*\*\*

Jason and North stood at the edge of the city, above ground. It was also the outer limit of Jason’s current spirit domain. It was marked by a familiar gloom, masking what lay beyond but up close, they could make out at least some of it. It appeared to be another city, from the geometric shapes they saw looming in the dark.

“I like to scout out territories before I expand into them,” Jason said. “Get a sense of what I’m working with. It probably won’t help but I do it anyway.”

“When cautiousness and recklessness are equally available options, caution is the wiser choice,” Mr North said.

“Was that meant to be profound?” Jason asked. “It sounds like it was meant to be profound when it’s the very obvious position.”

“You don’t have to be rude.”

“I mean, be cautious if it costs you nothing? I’ve got no problem with you saying it, but don’t make it sound like it’s some sage advice. Is this how you keep your organisation in line? Saying common sense stuff while doing a Morgan Freeman impression?”

“You realise that most people don’t like you, right?” Mr North asked.

“Yeah, but at least the ones that do are decent people. Anyone who’d put your poster up is probably on a watch list.”

They made their way into the gloom and found that it was another city, but very different from the underground metropolis behind them. This one looked like the cover of a fantasy book, with floating buildings and winding, impossibly narrow spires reaching into the sky. Jason imagined that without the gloom it would be very beautiful.

“Is this an elf city or something?” Jason wondered as they wandered down a street made of machine-smooth flagstones.

“Far worse,” Mr North said. “A messenger city.”

“Messenger?” Jason said. “Like angels?”

Henrietta Geller, the sister of Jason’s friend Humphrey, was a summoning specialist. One of her summons was an angelic being with potent healing powers. Jason’s system had identified it as a messenger.

“They have the look of angels,” Mr North said. “They’re a race with too much inherent magic to absorb essences. Quite isolationist, due to xenophobia, stemming from a thick streak of self-righteous tyranny. They remind me of you, which is why I doubt you’d get along.”

“You think I’m a tyrant?”

“Mr Asano, tell me that you don’t have a habit of making declarations and then using your power and influence to enforce them.”

Jason frowned but didn't respond.

“Will the anomalies take the form of messengers?” Mr North asked.

“If this is a messenger city, then most likely,” Jason said. “What kind of powers can we expect?”

“Flight, obviously. Damaging their wings can impede that ability, but not negate it entirely. It’s mostly a magical power, despite the appearance.”

“Angels never were especially aerodynamic.”

“Aside from that, expect light-based attacks and healing as standard. Different varieties have other powers, often related to their wings. Shooting razor-sharp feathers, using them as weapons or shields, that kind of thing. Some know a specialised ritual that uses their inherent powers as a basis. It adds versatility and power to their capabilities, but has the usual drawbacks of combat rituals.”

“I’m familiar,” Jason said.

“You know a combat ritualist?”

“I slept with his wife.”

“I’m familiar with your history, Mr Asano. That is definitely a lie.”

Jason was about to respond when the gloom around them started dissipating, revealing the vibrant colours of the city. Both men started looked around, wary and curious.

“Is this you?” Mr North asked.

“It is not.”

“Then what is it?”

“If I knew that I’d—”

- 
- This territory has been claimed as part of a nascent spirit domain.
  - Your spirit domain abuts this territory. You may contest this territory by expanding your own spirit domain into it prior to it being fully claimed.
- 

“Well,” Jason said. “I guess we have an answer on whether the rules changed for the others.”

\*\*\*

“The anomalies carry within them vessels containing transformation energy,” Jason explained as he and Mr North hurried down a flagstone street, back toward Jason’s territory. “That energy is unstable if you ...”

He trailed off as they approached the boundary of Jason's domain, currently a shimmering curtain of blue-black energy. An angelic being manifested from the curtain, floating in the air, its wings spread out behind it. Threads Jason could barely see erupted from the ground under it, kicking up dust as they penetrated the flagstones. They wrapped around the creature and slammed it into the ground.

The messenger anomaly started glowing with white light, but parts of the threads wrapped around it started glowing in turn, lighting up in runes of blue, red and yellow, drawn out by the threads. The white light dimmed and Jason held out a hand, the palm slick with blood. Leeches poured out to bury the messenger.

“As far as I can tell,” Mr North said, “it has the power of a normal, gold-rank messenger.”

“Which is how powerful, exactly? You don’t seem to have trouble suppressing it.”

It was thrashing around under the pile of leeches, although it didn’t scream or vocalise in any other way.

“It’s in the range of a low-end gold-rank monster,” Mr North said. “Their intelligence and ability to work in coordination are the biggest threats.”

Jason started casting more spells to accelerate the death of the helpless creature yet even his escalating afflictions took far longer than he’d like to finish the job. Only the exponential nature of the damage made it possible at all and he was once more reminded of his earliest adventuring days when killing a powerful creature felt like chopping down a tree with a spoon. After the messenger died, Jason drained and looted the creature and they passed through the dark veil into Jason’s domain.

“Claiming a territory,” Jason said, resuming his explanation “requires a stabilised version of the energy vessels I was talking about.”

“The ones from the anomalies.”

“Yes. If you just dig them out, they’re unstable and do very bad things if you try to use them.”

“Giant tentacle monster bad?” Mr North asked.

“It’s a possible outcome, but not the only one.”

“Did you at least warn the man before letting him leave with those things in hand?”

“I did.”

“His own fault, then,” Mr North said.

“Please don’t agree with my decisions,” Jason said. “It makes me uncomfortable.”

Jason explained that cores needed to be looted to stabilise, positing that someone else had figured that out and started using them. It was why he changed his mind about explaining the process to Mr North at all.

“I didn’t think it was possible for anyone else,” Jason said. “It should only work with the conjunction of effects I have. The magic door and some of my other powers.”

“Do you have a hypothesis?” Mr North asked.

“Best guess? The ability I developed in the last transformation zone somehow affected this one. It’s how I’m able to use my full suite of powers when they were sealed away last time. The question is whether that’s true for whoever else is out there. I know you’re not an essence user, but have your powers been affected?”

Mr North hesitated before answering.

“Yes,” he reluctantly admitted. “My inherent powers as a rune spider remain intact, but the additional powers I’ve developed in the years since I was a familiar are unavailable to me.”

“Gerling probably won’t have his powers, then. I’m not sure what kind of powers the necromancer has.”

“He’s an essence user,” Mr North said. “We were able to recruit him by being more ethically flexible than the Network.”

“Same for him, then. The vampires probably have their full powers, although the ambient magic here is gold-rank. If this sun above us counts as genuine sunlight, they’ll be desperately avoiding the day, which works for us.”

“Do you know who claimed that territory?” Mr North asked.

“Someone with the power to loot.”

“Does ritual magic work if your powers are sealed?” Mr North asked.

“I don’t recall ever checking,” Jason said.

“If it does, it may be Gerling,” Mr North said. “He had Barbou and a handful of silver-rankers with him. Barbou can perform a looting ritual and, as you said, he has most likely thrown in with Gerling for the sake of survival.”

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Jason said.

“What course of action are we going to take?” Mr North asked.

“I can contest the territory while whoever it turns out to be is still trying to claim it,” Jason said. “I’m just letting them do most of the work first.”