

Chapter 420

I'm Going to Bet on Myself

After a moment of stunned surprise, the family of celestines erupted in questions, from where they were to what had happened to them. Jason delicately used aura suppression to calm them down and fix their attention on him.

"I know you all have questions," he told them. "I have answers but first we need to go. There are dangers here and I need to take you somewhere safe."

The family was made up of an older couple, two young women, three young men and a pair of children. One of the young women narrowed her eyes at Jason.

"You're Jason Asano," she said. "I've seen you on television."

"Yep. Lovely to meet you. You may have noticed from TV that when I show up it's because bad stuff is either about to happen or is already happening. We seriously need to go."

"Where's your magic cloak?"

"That's a longer story than we have time for right this second. Can you get this lot moving?"

The woman seemed to be handling the situation better than her shell shocked family, so Jason deputised her as wrangler for the rest and had her lead them all outside. Shade was waiting in a helicopter form reminiscent of the one Kaito had used, but in more of a black and white, Airwolf colour scheme. It was a large design with enough room for everyone in the spacious passenger compartment.

After shepherding the family aboard, Jason climbed into the back with them and the helicopter took off. One of the kids pointed out the window at something, drawing everyone's attention.

"There are people there! We need to help them," the child said.

"They aren't people," Jason said, who had long been tracking them with his aura senses. "Look again."

Closer inspection of the creatures approaching the farmhouse revealed that only distance gave them the illusion of humanity. They were oddly-proportioned and way too large, like fantasy dwarves except three metres tall.

"What are those things?" the young woman who had helped Jason asked.

"Monsters?"

"Basically," Jason said. "It's a little more nuanced than that, but for practical purposes, yes. I'm Jason, as you know. May I ask your name?"

“Nikoleta.”

“Okay, Nikoleta, I know you have a lot of questions.”

“Yes. Where are we? How did we get here? What happened to our hair and eyes?”

“Yeah,” Jason said with a sympathetic wince. “Okay, you’ve seen the transformation zones on the television right? The big domes that change places and the people caught in them?”

“We were in one of those domes?”

“You still are,” Jason said.

Nikoleta looked out the window at the sky.

“I don’t see any dome. I didn’t think anyone woke up inside them, either.”

“This one is a bit different than normal,” Jason said. “That’s why I came inside to deal with it.”

“I didn’t think anyone go into the domes.”

“Then how?” Nikoleta asked.

Jason flashed her a grin.

“I’m not just anyone.”

She narrowed her eyes at him again.

“You’re quite full of yourself, aren’t you?”

Jason let out a laugh.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, I am.”

The transformation zone had turned the family from humans to celestines, whose astral affinity inured them to many of the dimensional space’s deleterious effects. Many was not all, however, and they started to feel ill. Once Shade flew far enough to get them within the boundary of Jason’s claimed and much more dimensionally stable territory they immediately started to recover.

They might not have been human anymore, but that very fact saved them. The connection they possessed to the astral as celestines protected them better than the shields the gold-rankers had used. As for the oppressive aura, Jason controlled that within his completed territory and could easily shield the family from it.

Jason moved into the cockpit of the helicopter, sealing himself off from the family.

“Should we take them to the portal and let them out?” Jason asked. “It feels like that would be sending them into the lion’s den.”

“They are likely to be seized upon by the people outside,” Shade agreed. “They are likely to be taken away and studied.”

"Let's just leave them at a house, then," Jason said. "We'll keep them here until we leave so there's a chance to protect them."

The helicopter set down in the residential area of the city and the family disembarked, looking around at the strange cloud houses. They were startled when the helicopter dissolved into Jason's shadow.

Jason took them into one of the houses. They reached out to touch the strange cloud-stuff it was made of, the adults wary but the children delighted. Jason hadn't explored one of the houses before but it was very much akin to the cloud houses created by his flask. After they got used to their odd surroundings and settled into some cloud furniture, Jason took the time to explain their situation as best he could.

While he did that, Jason had Shade scouring the spirit domain for food, hoping for a grocer or supermarket amongst the largely empty buildings. What he found was a large cluster of fruit trees in the forest territory and returned shortly afterwards, bringing back a large supply of pears, plums and peaches.

"It's all fruit starting with the letter P," Jason commented as Shade delivered the food. "Was it alphabetised? Is there a bunch of other fruit groves for the other letters?"

"This may not be the time, Mr Asano."

"Right, yes."

The family displayed a variety of responses to Shade. The older couple seemed to view him as some kind of demon and their circumstances in general as unnatural. The children were fascinated by their surroundings and the changes to themselves. Jason had a history of muddling explanations, so he was as plain and straightforward as he could be, which he admitted to himself wasn't very. He found it best to explain everything to Nikoleta after taking her aside as she was good at asking the right questions. He then left the rest of the family to her.

Jason gave the best explanation he could in the little time he had, given that every moment he spent out of the newly expanded region of his spirit domain it was shrinking away. The family would be safe inside a completed territory but Jason needed to go. Flying back toward the conflicted domain space in Shade's helicopter form, Jason voiced a concern he had.

"Do you think there are more people out there?" Jason asked. "We're lucky that this area was just some farmland with bugger all people."

Jason had asked about the family about neighbours and they said there were likely to be more survivors, depending on how big the dome was and exactly where it was positioned.

"There's no telling what will happen to anyone still in unclaimed territory when all this extra size from the proto-space goes away. You can't fit fifty kilometres of landscape inside five kilometres of space. Am I going to be killing people?"

"Mr Asano, while rescuing people is an admirable goal, you cannot know for sure how many of them are somewhere out in the unclaimed areas of the transformation zone. Only by completely taking over this zone could you do that and the attempt would be irresponsible."

"I know," Jason agreed.

"Your priority must continue to be stabilising the dimensional boundary."

"I know."

"Even at the cost of condemning some people to be annihilated."

"I know."

"With every territory the anomalies grow stronger, increasing the risk of outright failure."

"Bloody hell, Shade, I know!"

"Knowing the right choice is not the same as making it, Mr Asano. You may no longer be human, yet your human nature remains."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"It has good and bad points. Humans are poor at objectively assessing their circumstances. They can be irrational in ways that are destructive to themselves and the people around them. You know this."

"Yeah. And thanks, Shade. For keeping me on the right track."

"I am not infallible, Mr Asano."

"No one is, Shade. Whatever the gods may think."

The new territory's anomalies turned out to be trolls. Powerful but huge and lumbering, they were the perfect chance for Jason to deplete more unstable cores with the minigun. He quickly fought through multiple domains to capture the next territory but was faced with a problem. Both the core-launching bazooka and the minigun were showing signs of physical stress. Jason had been using them extensively and they were now showing signs of breaking down.

As he flew back to the house where the family was staying, he examined them both. The metal was starting to warp and the minigun would occasionally make new and unwelcome sounds while being fired. Of his other weapons, only his sword and the lightning gun were still proving effective against his increasingly powerful opponents, but each had its own issues.

The lightning gun showed no signs of wear and tear, not needing to channel the immense power of unstable genesis cores that was wearing out the larger weapons. The mana consumption to kill rate simply wasn't enough to wipe out enough anomalies, though. As for the sword, it was reaching the limits of what enemies it could truly harm. If not for the special attack he unlocked, it might not have been worth using anymore.

"I have no idea how to repair the heavy weapons," Jason said, " and I haven't looted anything that could replace them."

As the anomalies grew fewer in number but individually stronger, the loot they dropped had changed from weapons and potions to awakening stones and essences, many of which were rare and valuable. The trolls had dropped might and blood essences, but much more valuably, renewal essences. Renewal essences were of the second-highest rarity but were considered as valuable as most legendary essences due to being the premier essence for healers. Jason had picked up four of them in the course of wiping out a territory's worth of trolls.

The specific essences largely depended on the enemies, which was the norm, even if the drop rate was accelerated. The animal hybrids had dropped animal essences, along with essences like hunt, claw, might and swift. Jason had also managed to pick up three of the highly sought-after wing essences from them. Wing was an essence used in very desirable combinations, such as the dragon confluence that his friend Humphrey had and the phoenix confluence of Humphrey's sister. Their mother, Danielle, had acquired wing essences for her children at considerable cost.

As for herself, Danielle had an even more valuable essence. Dimension was arguably the single most desirable of the legendary essences, and Jason had managed to loot four of them. They didn't seem tied to specific enemies but were simply more prevalent in the unstable transformation zone.

They did little good for Jason in his immediate circumstances, though. They would make him wealthy after returning to the other world where their true value was understood, but what he needed at the moment was replacement weapons.

"It may be time to give up on these weapons, Mr Asano," Shade suggested. "If the weapons break down while in use, they may fail explosively, given the forces they channel."

"I don't think I can take another territory without them."

"Then perhaps it is time to accept that you have done enough. Your ability has completed its evolution."

The boss monster was another that fell to the core launcher but it was showing some dangerous warping. After claiming his new territory, Jason had followed Humphrey in gaining a second evolution of the same ability, although this was not something Jason knew, having shortly afterwards been torn from his friends. As with Humphrey, it was something Jason had been told wasn't possible. As for the nature of the ability, Jason was unsure what to make of it.

Ability: [Spirit Domain]

- This ability is evolved from the ability [Spirit Vault]. This is a secondary gift evolution.
- You have a dimensional storage space.
- You may call up a gate and physically enter your dimensional storage space. Only those you allow may enter; others cannot forcibly intrude. You may directly portal from within the storage space to another area using the location of the gate as a starting point, even if the gate is obstructed or destroyed, preventing ordinary egress.
- You may summon familiars within the storage space without the use of a ritual, although any material requirements of the ritual must still be consumed.
- You may create spirit domains that reflect your nature and power. The maximum total size of your spirit domains created through this ability is a factor of your rank and soul strength. You may not convert existing spirit domains into your own.
- Your current spirit domain exceeds your maximum total domain size available through this ability by 963,241%. Increase your rank to increase available domain size.

The ability was again not something that helped Jason immediately. He wasn't sure exactly how useful a spirit domain was outside if trying to patch a hole in the side of reality. It seemed unlikely that Jason would maintain his current domain size once the transformation zone was stabilised since it eclipsed the space of the dome covering it by a vast margin. It also exceeded the limits of his ability by a factor of almost ten thousand.

It was another thing that he put aside as a concern for later. His immediate focus had to be what to do next, be it stabilise the zone immediately or push for more territory. Jason agreed with Shade's points about the risks of pushing on but held two major reservations about stopping. One was the concern of finding more people, but Shade was right in that he couldn't let them take priority over the world at large.

The greater consideration was how much damage would be done to the dimensional membrane of the world when Jason merged the transformation zone back into normal reality.

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- **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. Current severity reduction: 41.8%**
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The counterpoint to these concerns was whether another territory was even possible. With his best weapons on the verge of collapse and even stronger enemies in the offing, each option had its own potential for disaster.

"I'm going to bet on myself," Jason decided. "One more territory."

"While it may be a risk," Shade said, "letting things stand as they are could well be the greater one."

"That was my thinking as well," Jason said. "I was originally hoping to unseal more powers and clean-sweep this place but I think I'm coming up on the limit. One last push before we bring this thing to a close. I just hope it's enough."