

## Chapter 422

### Necessary Evil

Mr North stepped from unclaimed territory into Jason's spirit domain. He was in the bottom of a rocky canyon, with sulphurous vents letting out steam from the volcanic activity below. He scaled the canyon wall with the same adroitness his true spider form would have had and then walked to the top of a nearby ridge. He looked out over the domain, spotting the pagoda at the centre of the palace complex.

"Oh, Mr Asano," he muttered as the aura of Jason's domain washed over him. "You are getting out of hand."

"I've got no interest in being in your hand," Jason said.

Mr North hid his surprise as he turned to face Jason, who was wearing his blood robe and starlight cloak. His dagger was in his hand, although held casually at his side for the moment. Under the dark hood was the unnerving, unreadable light of Jason's eyes.

"Not many can sneak up on me, Mr Asano. Not in this world."

"Those spider threads you have wafting around you are hard to spot," Jason said. "The trick is looking for the tiny bit of aura you put in them. A requirement to use them as sensory organs, I assume."

"And you can push your senses to the limit here without fear of being noticed because this place is already flooded with your aura," Mr North said.

"In this place, Mr North, it doesn't matter if I'm noticed."

"I suppose not. You must be wondering why I'm here?"

"No," Jason said. "I'm wondering if you triggered this transformation zone."

"You think I would put the whole world in jeopardy like this?"

"You've done it before. I haven't forgotten who disabled the grid and plunged the world into calamity, Mr North. The day will come when you're called to account for that."

"It was a necessary evil, Mr Asano. I wanted to do things more gradually but your return forced my hand. When you were fumbling around in ignorance that was fine but your friend Dawn accelerated the course of events, truncating my timeline. The magical development of your world needed to be accelerated in turn and humanity needed to be united by a common enemy so they're ready when the next one comes."

"You were getting ready for the vampire war?"

"Nothing that mundane. The people of your world remained stubbornly fractious in the wake of the monster waves, so I developed a means to infuse blood with reality core energy and slipped it to the Cabal. Finally, people are pulling together to face the threat."

Jason's grip on his dagger grew tighter.

"You're behind the ancient vampires?"

"I promise you, Mr Asano, the enemy you unleash will be far worse. This world needs to be ready. Of course, the vampires needed to a plausible threat without truly threatening humanity, which is why this astral space needed to be dealt with."

"What is this enemy I'm going to unleash?"

"That will be your necessary evil, Mr Asano. Or perhaps, necessary consequence would be a more appropriate descriptor. You'll be unwitting, after all. We can't have you killing the baby in an attempt to shield it from an abusive parent."

"You don't trust me to make the right choice."

"You've already made the right choice, Mr Asano. There's no point complicating matters."

"Isn't that my decision to make?"

"Yes, which is why we're keeping it from you. You've had failures in judgement before."

"You keep saying 'we.' Who else are you talking about?"

"Your friend, Dawn. We've never discussed it, or even met, but we both made the same choice for the same reasons. If you don't trust me, trust her. She set you on the right path, even if you're walking it faster than I'd like."

"I don't know exactly how strong you are, North, but in this place, the advantages are all mine. You think I can't make you talk?"

"I think your instincts are telling you that I'm right. I think you don't entirely trust yourself and I think you won't like you who become if you start torturing me for information. You'd have to go hard, and you know that. Harder than you want. I also think you need me. Do you have the power to resolve what's happening here alone?"

"What has happened here?" Jason asked. "This transformation zone didn't form naturally. If you didn't trigger it, who did? And why are you even here?"

"Perhaps we can discuss this somewhere more comfortable than a rocky outcropping?"

"Fine," Jason said. "Shade? Emi special, please."

Darkness emerged from Jason's shadow and took the form of a rugged dirt bike, inevitably black, along with a sidecar.

"You're kidding," Mr North said, looking at the sidecar. "Can't you just open a portal?"

"None of my archway abilities work here," Jason said. "My spirit vault, the node space door. I can shadow jump, but no portals."

He slung his leg over the bike and waited.

“You could always jog.”

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The deep astral did not have geography in any way that made sense from the perspective of physical reality. Only when the physical and the astral merged did concepts like distance become anything more than metaphorical. The borders of physical reality were a place such interactions took place, although border was something of a misnomer. Other such interactions were astral spaces, where physical and the astral were blended together, as well as the dimensional vessels used to navigate the astral.

Such Dimensional vessels were essentially mobile astral spaces, and usually much smaller than astral spaces that formed naturally. The astral space Jason had fought the Builder over had once been an unconventionally vast dimension ship, until it was stolen and affixed to the world of Pallimustus, acting more like a normal astral space.

The dimensional vessel Shako used to travel was another that belonged to the Builder, although much more modest in proportion. Like Dawn, he had left it close to Earth’s unstable patch of dimensional membrane and projected an avatar through. After losing his temper, his avatar had been destroyed by the formation of the transformation zone and he was constructing another.

Unlike Dawn, who had permission to be present and made the strongest avatar she could, Shako made the weakest, to support his case for non-intervention. It was skirting on the wrong side of the line but the World-Phoenix was notoriously averse to direct confrontation. Unless Shako was brazen about violating the agreement, she would not intervene. With Dawn gone and no one else to look over his shoulder, that was all the more true.

The door to Shako’s chamber opened and his servant, Keffin, entered, glancing at the half-formed avatar, currently in the form of a person-shaped being of light.

“Lord Shako,” Keffin said. “Another vessel has approached and contacted us.”

Shako snorted.

“The World-Phoenix called Dawn back to wring some minor concessions out of me again?”

“No, sir. The vessel is the Last Ferry.”

“Velius?” Shako said, pleasantly surprised. “Great. Invite him aboard.”

“Are you certain that’s a good idea, sir?”

“I’ve known Velius longer than you’ve been alive, Keffin. He’s an old friend.”

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“That,” Mr North said as he clambered out of the sidecar, “was very undignified. Also, it would have been faster to run, with my power level.”

“I gave you the option,” Jason said. “At least I didn’t make you wear a little helmet.”

Jason led Mr North into the pagoda and up to the mezzanine lounge.

“If you didn’t do this,” Jason asked as they sat, “then who did?”

Mr North looked at the hood still shrouding Jason’s face and the blade still held in his hand.

“Must you be so cloak and dagger, Mr Asano?”

“I might be more amenable to jokes, Mr North, if you weren’t one of history’s greatest monsters. How many deaths can we lay at your door? The monster waves. The necromancer who animated the Makassar victims. He got his start in your house, Mr North. A house that, sooner or later, I am going to burn down.”

“So scary. I’m afraid that my little organisation is quite beneath you. I never intended them to be ready for today’s fights. Plus, they never really understood the consequences of my directives.”

“They were just following orders?”

“I take your point,” Mr North conceded. “Even so, you have larger concerns.”

“Who triggered this transformation zone, North. And why are you in it?”

“I came for Gerling.”

“Gerling?”

“He’s in here with us, somewhere. He learned that you were coming here and wanted to catch you inside.”

“He did this?”

“No. He simply came for you.”

“How did he get through the seal?”

“He took Adrien Barbou to let him in. Blew up my office building to do it. I came to take Adrien back.”

“You really care about some lackey?”

“I’m very old, Mr Asano, but in that time I’ve had very few friends. Would you do any less for yours?”

“Friends?”

“Is that so hard to believe? I like Adrien.”

“You know that Barbou’s a ship-jumper, right? He turned on the rest of the Network for the Lyon branch, on the Lyon branch for the EOA and is probably spilled every secret he had to Gerling.”

"I know, which is why I was careful about which secrets he had. I may have let one or two slip, but nothing critical. True friends, Mr Asano, are willing to accept their friends' faults. Something you, of all people, should be rather grateful for."

"Then who triggered this transformation zone?"

"Another acquaintance of yours. Chen."

"The gold ranker from China?"

"Yes, although he was merely a cat's paw. He used a magical device he doesn't understand, the designs of which were provided by a man from beyond our world. Does the name Shako mean anything to you?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "He killed me once."

"Well, he just tried again. I was scouting out the astral space when I saw Shako and Chen place the device in the aperture. Once the transformation zone triggered, I went in before it was sealed off."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I understand what is at stake if this abnormal transformation zone isn't smoothly resolved. The last one almost shook open the dimensional barrier keeping this world intact. It can't take another even like that."

"I know," Jason said.

The dagger and his cloak vanished as he stood up and walked over to lean on the mezzanine railing.

"It really was because I came here," he said. "I shouldn't have done it."

"You have a hero complex, Mr Asano. It makes you easy to predict. Easy to manipulate. But look around. The world needs heroes."

"Yet, you play the villain."

"We each have our role."

"What do you know about Shako?" Jason asked.

"I know he's a servant of the Builder, little more. That much I got from his aura."

"The Builder isn't allowed to interfere with this world anymore," Jason said. "There's an agreement in place. The Builder isn't allowed to send people here."

"So I've heard," Mr North said. "Technically, he wasn't here. What I saw was a projection, much like those your friend Dawn used."

"Will that count as a violation of the agreement?"

"Without knowing the specifics, I couldn't make an informed assessment. In my experience, it's a matter of what you can get away with and whether you were successful."

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“Velius,” Shako said as he welcomed the dark-skinned celestine with curly silver hair onto his dimensional vessel. “It’s good to see you again.”

“I wish I could say the same, Shako,” Velius said, his expression sober.

“Oh, come on,” Shako said. “Is this about the agreement? I may have walked the line a little, but—”

“You already walked the line, Shako. This time you crossed it.”

“I didn’t act. I didn’t go in person. I didn’t even send an avatar with magic. Any fool with a sword could have killed it.”

“Your master agreed to abide to not just to the letter but the spirit of the agreement, Shako. Speaking of technicalities is essentially a confession.”

“That agreement was made to the World-Phoenix’s representative,” Shako said. “Why isn’t she here? You represent the Reaper.”

“Whom is party to the same accord.”

“What does the Reaper care about Asano? Its only interest was in stopping the World-Phoenix from constantly resurrecting her pawns.”

“The Reaper’s interest is that a bargain was struck, so the bargain must be kept. Your master is young and has never shown the proper respect for the accords by which the great astral beings operate. You have inherited this tendency and it is time for the both of you to pay. One price that will serve for you both.”

“And what price is that?” Shako asked with a flinty expression.

“The price is you, Shako. It’s time for you to come with me.”

“You want me to go off with you? If you want me onto your vessel, Velius, you’ll need to drag me there yourself.”

“No, Shako. If you refuse, I will go back alone.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Carmen will be the one to come get you.”

“You’ll send Carmen?”

“I won’t need to. She’s aboard the Last Ferry.”

Shako froze, his pale skin turning a whiter shade of pale.

“The Reaper is done indulging you and your master, Shako.”

“The Builder won’t stand for this.”

“If he was going to intervene, he would have,” Velius said. “You know that. He’s serving you up as the price for his own transgressions. So, will you be coming with me, or will Carmen have to come and get you?”

Shako hung his head.

“I’ll go.”

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“What are you proposing?” Jason asked, still leaning on the rail as Mr North lounged behind him on a cloud couch.

“Do you have the means to stabilise this transformation zone more fully than the last?” Mr North asked.

Jason closed his eyes.

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- 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. Current severity reduction: 69.1%
  - Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?
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“The means, yes,” Jason said. “The strength, no.”

“What I’m proposing is to add my strength to yours.”

“You’re offering to help?”

“Yes, but will even that be enough?”

“Probably not,” Jason admitted.

“Then I’m afraid our classic hero-villain team-up will need to be expanded. Gerling, the necromancer. The vampires, if they’re up and about. Needs must, Mr Asano.”

“Will they be active?” Jason asked. “Until you, all I’d found were transformed civilians. The would-be ghouls, waiting for conversion.”

“In a normal transformation zone, anyone with magic caught inside is rendered unconscious for the duration and left otherwise unchanged. That has not happened to you and I, so it stands to reason that others are similarly active.”

“My abilities are a large part of how this space operates,” Jason said. “The door was a key component of making it work, although not the only factor.”

“Then we likely have you to thank for retaining our faculties. I don’t have the answers, Mr Asano. Transformation zones were never a part of my plan. I didn’t even know they were possible.”

Jason turned around to face Mr North.

“I don’t want to work with you. Or Gerling, or vampires or your itinerant necromancer. Frankly, I want to kill the job lot of you.”

“Will you?” Mr north asked lightly.

“You know that I won’t. I don’t have a lot of options, do I?”

“At this stage, Mr Asano, I think we should be grateful to have even one.”