

Chapter 269

The Single Greatest Thing on This Planet

In the otherworldly floating gazebo, Jason was reunited with his familiars. While he was pleased to see them, the revelation that Shade had known the nature of the World-Phoenix token was startling.

“How long have you known what token could do?” Jason asked.

“Several thousand years,” Shade said.

“Millennia,” Jason said. “It never occurred to you that I might want to know it could bring me back to life?”

“Of course,” Shade said. “I chose quite specifically to withhold that information from you.”

“Why?”

“Mr Asano, you are more than reckless enough as it is. Your propensity to pick fights you can’t win was neatly demonstrated by your recent demise. If you realised you had a tool to bring you back from death, I have no doubt you would have been even more cavalier with your mortality.”

“Yeah, well, it is kind of hard to refute death,” Jason conceded.

“I hope that you will act with more caution in future. We all do.”

Jason turned to the cloaked forms of his other familiars. Gordon was a disembodied cloak filled with power, while the leech swarm, Colin, was bound up in bloody rags in a cloaked, humanoid shape. Both of them nodded in agreement with Shade’s assertion.

“My own familiars are ganging up on me. What a sad state of affairs.”

“Then I suggest you stop trying to get yourself killed,” Shade said. “You are demonstrably good at it.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “Do you have any insight into the World-Phoenix, Shade?”

“Some,” Shade said. “You are undecided about the power she has offered you?”

“Did you sense that through our connection, or did I miss something while my soul was making its way back across the astral?” Jason asked.

“I took the opportunity to reconnect with my progenitor while your soul was in his care,” Shade said.

“You saw your Dad; that’s nice. He didn’t give you any insights into what the World-Phoenix is after, did he?”

“It only said that the power was designed in negotiation between the World-Phoenix and the Reaper itself,” Shade said. “I believe it withheld further information, knowing that I would pass it along to you.”

“More secrets. Wonderful.”

“The power evolution you have been offered is unusual,” Shade said. “The basis is something I have seen from the World-Phoenix in the past, but the Reaper’s hand in its design is clear.”

“Oh?”

“You have a habit of not staying dead,” Shade said. “This is not something the Reaper likes. You have its gratitude, however. The Reaper rarely involves itself with the mortals that venerate it; the Builder is unusual amongst astral beings in this regard. The Reaper appreciates that without you, the souls of its followers would still be trapped inside the undying flesh abominations. So long as the ability assures that the next time you die you stay dead, the Reaper will see you compensated in kind.”

“This power would heal me up when I otherwise would have died,” Jason said.

“Doesn’t he have a problem with me cheating death?”

“The Reaper does not care if you cheat death,” Shade explained. “It only cares if you cheat being dead. There is a difference.”

“Then why prevent revival magic from working?” Jason asked. “That can only be issued right after you die, right?”

“There are more potent diamond-rank resurrection effects that are permitted to be less timely,” Shade said. “Such powers can return the soul after it has left the body, instead of merely restoring the body before the soul has departed. Such powers touch upon the domain of any local god of death, who may intercede for good or ill, as they choose.”

“So, this ability would put me back together while my soul was still around,” Jason said. “Once it’s gone, though, it’s gone.”

“The aspect of the ability you are being offered that prevents resurrection is not an artificial restriction. It is a function of the combined physical and spiritual state you would attain on accepting the power; body and soul as a single, gestalt entity. One of the ramifications of this state would be that once the physical element dies and it becomes fully spiritual, it stays that way. Rather than an ordinary soul, you would be closer to an astral being, like myself. You would be no more able to resurrect than I am.”

“But I could become someone’s familiar?”

"I don't know," Shade said. "We have reached the limit of my knowledge on the topic. One more thing to mention, however, is that the ability description only briefly touches on the resistance to effects that impact the soul-body connection."

"That's important?"

"Much in the way your interface ability's description leaves out the rather important aspect of looting, this ability does not express the value of the inherent resistances that come from being a physical and spiritual gestalt. This particular aspect of the ability is something that would become increasingly valuable as you increase in rank, when dealing with astral affairs, high-rank astral entities and certain high-rank ability effects. Entities that are both spiritual and physical in nature have significant advantages when operating on an interdimensional scale. This aspect is not something that would help you much at your current rank, but would show its value over time."

"So, you're saying that your dad made sure this power is the good stuff, in return for making sure I stay dead next time?" Jason asked.

"That is a part of it," Shade confirmed. "Clearly, the power is designed to serve several agendas. Those of the World-Phoenix and the Reaper, certainly. But also to serve yours."

"Because it would give me the tools to fight the Builder?"

"In part," Shade said. "There is a balance between great astral beings, just as there is a balance between the gods of a world. They keep one another in check. This is why the great astral beings do not give power evolutions to their favoured supporters that contain as much magic as they can stand without it destroying them."

"Makes sense, I guess. Checks and balances."

"This ability you have been offered is a product of a bargain struck between great astral beings. It operates outside of that balance. There is a price to taking it, but the power is far greater than you would normally receive."

"That much I figured out," Jason said.

"The ability seems to be an enhanced variant of an ability that the World-Phoenix frequently blesses those who serve its interests with. These are generally high-ranking individuals whose tasks involve traversing the astral. Your intention is to find a reliable path between this world and the one you just left, yes?"

"Yes," Jason confirmed.

"That is what makes this power most advantageous to you. This ability will not give you the power to traverse realities, but it will make otherwise unfeasible solutions more viable."

“So you think I should take the ability?” Jason asked.

“My inclination would be to decline,” Shade said. “The benefits are many, but the danger it poses to your long-term survivability is not a risk I think you should take. On the other hand, the Reaper has become increasingly dissatisfied with the rising impermanence of death over the last few millennia. Its tolerance for cheating death has been waning and it informed me, while I was waiting to be resummoned, that the Reaper is finally taking steps. I suspect your multiple resurrections are at least part of the impetus.”

“Great, so I’m the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

“More precisely, the World-Phoenix. The Reaper doesn’t want the World-Phoenix to continually resurrect you or any of her other pawns. The World-Phoenix has always acted with decorum in regard to its right to do this, but the Reaper is concerned that the Builder’s actions may provoke an unwelcome response.”

“What kind of steps is the Reaper taking?” Jason asked.

“Pressuring death gods to make resurrection magic more difficult, more costly and less reliable.”

“Doesn’t that invalidate certain essence powers?”

“No,” Shade said. “Essence powers have a natural balance. In any location where the local death god impedes resurrection, that same change will enhance the non-resurrection effects of relevant abilities.”

“And the Reaper pushed this power onto the World-Phoenix to offer me?”

“The only requirement the Reaper made was that you stay dead next time. The rest of the power comes from the World-Phoenix.”

“Which raises the question of what the World-Phoenix wants,” Jason said. “I’m not above helping someone out in return for mutual benefit, but there’s a difference between cutting a deal and being pushed into one without being told the details. Also, I’m not sure what I have to offer. I can’t imagine anything I can do that can’t be done better by someone else. I doubt the World-Phoenix is hard up for volunteers.”

“The World-Phoenix does not like to act directly,” Shade said. “It prefers to set things in motion that will ultimately achieve the end it desires.”

“So I’ve heard,” Jason said. “What does that mean for me?”

“Most likely,” Shade said, “is that the World-Phoenix believes that you will naturally act in a way that furthers its goals, so long as you have the tools and the opportunity. Therefore, it has tried to give them to you.”

“I’m not going to reject the power out of hand,” Jason said. “I’m not ungrateful for the coming back from the dead thing. I’m not just going to go along with what it wants, no

questions asked, though. It is true that she couldn't use the power to unduly influence me, right?"

"Blessing powers to not offer control over their recipients," Shade confirmed.

"I'm just going to leave it be, for the moment, then," Jason said. "I can reassess it later."

"Prudent," Shade said approvingly.

"What's say we get out of this weird dimension and hit the road, then," Jason said.

"Now you're back in action, I have some more flexibility in my transport options. Having you turn into a magical carriage would look a bit odd driving down the street, though. Even a horse would be more subtle, but not great in the rain."

"I'll see what I can manage," Shade said.

Jason's familiars returned to his body and he went back through the archway, emerging back in the empty hospital ward.

"I believe that I can manage an acceptable form of conveyance," Shade said from Jason's shadow.

"Exactly how much control do you have over the form of mount you take?" Jason asked.

"Your ability defines the general parameters," Shade said. "Within those parameters, the choice of form is mine to make. In the astral space, for example, I could have transformed into any animal that was suited to jungle travel. I chose the mantis beetles, but could have easily taken the form of a large serpent or an arboreal climber."

"My original intention was to try portalling directly to Sydney to look for my uncle," Jason said. "Since I have you, I think I might head back to my home town and check on the family. The question is whether I portal straight there or catch a ride. What kind of mount is appropriate to a hospital environment? You're not going to turn into an ambulance, are you?"

Three of Shade's bodies emerged from Jason shadow and melded together into the form a sleek, black, two-door sports car.

"Strewth," Jason said. "Shade, you look like a space ninja's car. Is this an actual car that exists somewhere?"

"So long as I adhere to the basic properties of the conveyance ascribed by your ability, I am able to conform to my own sense of design aesthetics," Shade the car said.

"Does it meet with your approval?"

“Does the super-sweet talking car meet with my approval? Shade, you may be the single greatest thing on this planet. That definitely answers whether I’m going to ride or try a portal.”

The car transformed to a cloud of shadows that returned to Jason’s own shadow.

“That’s going to make parking easy,” Jason said. “I think it’s time to get out of here.”

From his inventory he retrieved his magic umbrella. It could shield him from water when he was completely submerged, so it would be more than up to the task of handling the rain. He leapt through the window as he opened the umbrella, his shadow cloak appearing around him as he drifted to the ground like Mary Poppins.

He followed a concrete path through the overgrown grass of the hospital grounds to the street, not bothering to hold the umbrella floating dutifully behind him. He popped a bronze spirit coin into his mouth to normalise his recovery rates as he gently expanded his aura. Not sensing any other auras within it, he had Shade once again take the form of a car. Slipping inside, he settled luxuriously into the soft, shadow stuff seats.

The interior was opulent, in Shade’s usual colourations of black and white. Looking over the dash, it appeared to have the full functionality of a car.

“Shade, is that a sound system?” Jason asked.

“I adhere to the parameters of the form I have taken. That includes something called Bluetooth functionality, which does not appear to involve teeth or the colour blue.”

“Nice. Can you drive yourself?”

“I can.”

“Maybe I should have had you turn into an ’81 Trans Am.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“It’s for making a shadowy flight into the world of a man who does not exist.”

“That had not alleviated my confusion.”

“Do you have a turbo boost button?”

“I do not.”

“Oh well,” Jason said. “Let’s hit the road.”

“I need to work on my driving skills,” Jason said as he drove through the rain. It was only a short half-hour to his home town of Casselton Beach, the wet conditions only adding a few minutes.

There was nothing wrong with Jason’s abilities as a driver, if his only concerns were driving like a normal person. His problem was the speed and power he could feel within Shade’s car form. Despite making very little noise, Jason could feeling the speed and

power waiting to be unleashed. It was a hunting cat, poised and eager to pounce. The potential of it taunted Jason's ordinary driving skills, which would definitely not be able to handle them.

"I am perfectly capable of moving effectively and efficiently at speed without requiring input from a driver," Shade said.

"Says the guy with no turbo boost button," Jason said.

"I do not see how that is relevant," Shade said.

"Maybe I could find a driving skill book. No, that's pretty unlikely."

Jason had used some skill books to give him basic proficiency with alchemy and artifice. Anything he made would be laughable to an expert like Jory but at least he could make some basic consumable items, if he could find the materials. They would be of low quality, but a mediocre healing potion was still better than no healing potion.

His skill-book based crafting skills were certainly not up to the task of making a skill book, however. That required the skill not just to craft the book's enchantments but to integrate the proficiencies and knowledge of whatever expert was providing the contents.

The impressive functionality of Shade's car included projecting a head-up display on the windscreen. That gave him his first taste of hard information regarding his return, including the date and time.

"It's my sister's birthday next week," Jason said. "How did you even get this information? Do you have wi-fi or something?"

"I will remind you that it is your ability that is responsible for my shape-changing," Shade said. "Do you have wi-fi?"

Jason thought back to his old quest ability and its power to sense things from the world around him that he otherwise could not.

"I actually might," Jason said thoughtfully. "Magic wi-fi. It's probably not Windows compatible. I definitely seem to be running under a proprietary OS."

It had been late November when Jason left and now it was early June, a year and a half later. It was fully dark but not too late, being a little before nine. He still wasn't sure what he would do when he arrived at his parents house. He still intended to get more information before making his grand reappearance.

"There is something I think you should know," Shade said. "You asked if you missed anything while your soul was traversing the astral. The Reaper placed another soul alongside yours, which accompanied it into this world. It was not a soul I recognised but I believe this soul is most likely now an outworlder, here on your world."

“I think I knew that,” Jason said mused. “I arrived with this lingering sense that someone else should have been there with me. Finding out who they are and why they are here should be at the top of my priority list. Why would your dad send a soul my way? Isn’t that antithetical to his whole purpose?”

“It is,” Shade said. “It was the price the Reaper paid to have a say in the power offered to you.”

“So, it’s to help the World-Phoenix.”

“The choice was made to you. The Reaper does not like your continual return from death, but it is grateful for releasing the souls of the Reaper’s cultists trapped in the flesh monstrosities. As am I, by the way.”

“Any ideas on how we can find this outworlder?”

“It would depend on the conditions by which they were inserted into the world,” Shade said. “The World-Phoenix token placed you at the spot you were born, but this other soul is likely to have appeared at a random location.”

“Well, an outworlder should stand out at least. How hard can it be to find one weird person using the internet?”

Jason received a startling message as he reached the outskirts of his home town.

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- Contact [Erika Asano] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Ian Evans] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Emi Evans-Asano] has entered communication range.

Jason took in a sharp breath. The names of Jason’s sister and her family had been darkened on his contact list since it appeared with his evolved interface. They lived in Melbourne and had most likely come north to visit. They probably had some time off and had come back to Erika’s home town for her birthday next week.

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- Contact [Kaito Asano] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Amy Asano] has entered communication range.

Jason’s brother and his wife lived next to Jason’s parents, so it made sense that they would come into range at the same time. He drove through the empty streets of Casselton Beach towards his old street. The dark, the rain and his enhanced senses made the familiar unfamiliar.

He pulled to a stop across the street from the house where he grew up. Instead of getting out, Shade transformed into a cloud of darkness that retreated into Jason's shadow, leaving Jason standing and taking his umbrella back out.

The dark and quiet car had drawn no attention and Jason stood away from the street lights, the moonless, rainy night making him all but invisible. The first thing he noticed was the cars in the driveway. Neither of his parents cars were present, although they may have been in the carport. In their place were what he recognised as the cars of his sister and her husband. He had no idea why they would both bring their cars if they drove all the way up from Melbourne.

Jason let his aura senses wash over the house. He sensed two adults, who were wrangling with a child. He could feel the tiredness and frustration in the auras of the adults and the defiance of the child. She was apparently not a big fan of bed time.

Although he had never sensed the auras before, there was a familiarity to them. He had no doubt that it was his sister, Erika, her husband, Ian, and their daughter, Emi. There was no one else present; his parents were nowhere to be seen.

He had not seen his brother Kaito, or his wife, Amy, since before they were married. Jason turned his gaze to the house next door, where they lived. His wife's parents had retired early and moved to Tasmania, selling their house to their daughter. Their generous price gave the young family a financial head-start at a time when few young people could afford a home.

He brushed his senses over the house, sensing two adults and two sleeping children. They just had one at the time Jason left, the younger child only being a few months old. The auras of the adults were drenched in the tiredness of dealing with a new baby.

Jason turned his attention back to the house he grew up in. Had Erika and Ian bought his parents house, the way that Kaito and Ami had brought hers? Erika certainly had the money for it, but what about her TV series?

"Will you go in?" Shade asked.

"No," Jason said. "I need to know what they think happened. I need to come up with some kind of story that fits."

"You won't tell them the truth?"

"Eventually," Jason said, "but I'm just going to rock up and say 'hey, it turns out I'm alive and a wizard now, also, magic is real, there are alternate realities and your most fundamental understandings about reality fall somewhere between breathtakingly incomplete and utterly wrong.'"

“Perhaps a more measured approach would be best,” Shade agreed. “You will travel to the city you mentioned, as planned?”

“Sydney, yeah.”

“Will you be trying out a portal, or do you want to drive?”

“It’s a long drive,” Jason said, “but I think I could use that right now.”