

Chapter 895

Try Not to Bring Down Civilisation

Outer Rexion had many temples, but they weren't clustered together, as was the norm. With the town itself circling a massive shaft, the temple district likewise took the form of a ring. Positioned just behind the shaft-side plazas and entertainment districts, the houses of the holy were conveniently located for post-sin repentance.

What the locals called the Worship Ring was a wide boulevard. The cavernous ceiling accommodated the often exotic architecture of the temples, lining both sides of the broad street. Around each temple were annexes, stalls and shop fronts. Ritual supplies, holy books and iconography were all available, along with more specific products.

In defiance of geology and physics, underground rivers fed the growth chambers that produced all the food and water for Rexion. Accordingly, there was a small temple to the god of rivers in Outer Rexion, abutted by the world's least successful fishing supply shop.

Jason walked around the Worship Ring, down the wide and busy boulevard. He immediately recognised how much prime real estate had been allocated to the churches. He suspected the brighthearts had been generous when expanding the original outpost, since no temples could be built in Rexion proper.

The original brightheart city had its own temples and priesthoods, devoted to the same gods the surface dwellers worshipped. Those temples were long buried and the clergy long dead. The domains of the gods had been overrun by the Undeath priesthood, following the spiritual rules of holy war. It was something Jason understood himself; an instinctive knowledge that came from possessing domains himself.

Domains were, ordinarily, inviolable. A god could not move in on another god's territory, but their followers could. The first step was for the mortal servants of one god to conquer the territory around the spiritual domain of another. With sufficiently thorough control of the area around the domain, they could then invade it to claim for their own god.

Just as Undeath had claimed the site of the old city, so did Jason in resolving the transformation zone. The priests were eradicated, along with the god's power, embodied in the avatar. When Jason conquered the transformation zone, there was no one and nothing left to contest the ground.

As he made his way around the Worship Ring, he brushed against the domains of the various gods. It was a strange and complicated sensation, something between a handshake, a warning and a dating profile. He stopped in front of the temple of Hero,

where a sculpture stood in the middle of the boulevard. An edifice of bronze, silver and gold, with a lot of dark iron, people had to navigate around it to continue along their way.

The sculpture depicted a leonid figure. Fierce and menacing, it radiated power. The golden mane shone faintly with light and the dark armour glowed where the plates met. Jason could feel heat radiating from it. He wasn't sure how long he stood staring as the street traffic flowed past. He was stirred from his reverie by a voice right beside him.

"He wasn't like that. Angry and violent. He could be, yes, but only when he had to. So often are we only remembered for that which we didn't want to do in the first place."

Jason turned to see a man that looked to be in his mid-forties, but his silver rank meant that the real number would be much higher.

"You met him?" Jason asked.

"I once had the privilege. Quite a few years ago, now, on the other side of the world. But I have researched him quite extensively."

"Vitesse?"

"Greenstone," the man said with a smile. "You're him, aren't you?"

Jason took a closer look at the man. He wore simple coloured robes, like a priest of one of the more humble gods. Similar to those of the Healer, but without markings and a light sandy colour, rather than brown.

"You're one of them, aren't you?" Jason asked. "The former priests."

"We like to think of ourselves as seekers of purpose. But yes, Lord Asano. I am."

"Don't call me Lord."

"But that is what you—"

"I know what I am."

"Then what should we call you?"

"My name is Jason. If you insist on being formal, Mr Asano will do."

"Many of us are here, waiting for your return. We keep watch on this sculpture, knowing that you would come. We have been waiting for so long. For your guidance. And our purpose."

"Everyone seeks purpose. I'm not your messiah."

"Aren't you? We have studied your ways. Your nature. Your companions. You walk with gods and travel beyond reality. What was once yours alone you have gifted to every essence user. If you are not a god walking amongst us, you are akin to one. Do you even realise how your voice resonates in my mind like a song of the heavens?"

Jason muffled a groan.

“If you want someone to worship, look around. There are literally temples in every direction. There’s a reason I don’t have one.”

“But you do. Rexion is your temple.”

“No, it isn’t. It’s a home for a people who were almost wiped out. It belongs to them.”

“But your power—”

“Is irrelevant. You want me to be a god? If I hear about any of you proclaiming Rexion to be a temple or otherwise causing trouble for the brighthearts, then you will see my wrath.”

“Please do not be angry, Lo—”

“You’re not going to listen, are you? It’s been almost twenty years. Even if you had nothing left when I set you free, that’s enough time to build a life all over again. To find a purpose, or to make one for yourselves. I know a lot of you have. But the ones like you, you’ve spent it waiting for me to set you on some ill-defined path. And it’s not even me you’re waiting for? If you’ve been at it this long, you’ve built up some idea of me and convinced yourselves it will solve all your problems. That no one else can. I’ve seen where that leads, on the world I come from. But I’ll never be the person you’re imagining. No one can be.”

Jason threw out his arms, gesturing at the temples around them.

“That guidance you’re looking for? That purpose? That is what gods do. If none of them can fill the hole inside you, I certainly can’t.”

“Gods have failed us. You walk on the ground, yet possess their divinity. Not distant and heartless. You know what it is to struggle with the rest of us.”

“That doesn’t make me responsible for you. I’m the guy that saved you a long time ago. I will accept your gratitude, but you’re wasting the time you’ve gotten back. I’m not your path. You have to find your own.”

“We venerate you.”

“Don’t.”

Jason shook his head. He’d used his aura as a privacy shield, but he could sense the people watching them from a distance. More like this man. Their emotions were singular and driven. Obsessive. None of his words had put so much as a dent in the feelings of the man in front of him. He was hanging on Jason’s every word yet hearing none of them.

He looked up at the Gary sculpture, angry more than anything at being interrupted. There was no point wasting any more words on the man so he didn’t, vanishing into the sculpture’s shadow. He emerged somewhere he really didn’t want to be, but needed to.

The temple was one of the more unusual ones, being a tower shaped like an arm jutting up from the ground. Clenched in the hand at the top was a head glaring imperiously down on the passers by. Jason glared back up at it.

“Really?” he asked.

“It’s religion,” Dominion said, appearing next to Jason. “Showmanship is part of the deal.”

None of the passers-by seemed to notice the god.

“I didn’t handle that situation very well,” Jason said.

“There isn’t a good way to deal with that kind. Unless you want to kill them all.”

“No.”

“Then, sooner or later, there’s going to be a cult.”

“I think...”

Jason trailed off, then let out a sigh.

“I think I’m going to need some guidance. I’m not ready for what the power I have now will mean to people.”

“Yeah, you’re going to mess some things up. That’s nothing new, but the scale you’ll be doing it on is. You could do some real damage, now.”

“Yeah,” Jason agreed, his voice resigned. “I was hoping you had some advice.”

“Have you considered giant banners with your face on them?”

“That’s your advice?”

“This is how you ask for it? You know you’re terrible at praying, right? Rocking up to a temple and glaring at it like it owes you money.”

“That’s... not entirely unfair,” Jason conceded.

He turned to look at Dominion standing beside him.

“Do you actually rule anything?” Jason asked.

“My clergy knows damn well to follow orders.”

“But that’s it, right?”

“I am not a ruler, Jason. Kings and emperors rule. Caliphs and prime ministers and greater district regional distribution managers. They rule; I am the very concept of ruling. I am not a hegemon but hegemony itself.”

Jason thought on Dominion’s words while looking up at the menacing temple visage.

“Showmanship is part of the deal,” he said. “I was once told that you are the one that decides who rules and who serves. But that wasn’t right, was it?”

“No. There is no divine right of kings. Mortals choose and I try to help them not make a *complete* mess of things.”

“That former priest was right, wasn’t he? I’m not just some guy. I can’t be, anymore.”

“Not when they know who you are. But you don’t have to let them. I wander around all the time and no one has a clue.”

“I don’t suppose you have some tips on hiding all that power? I can do it well enough when I concentrate, but it’s like trying to hold in a poo. The moment things get exciting it’s going to pop out, whether I like it or not.”

“I can help you with that.”

Dominion casually held out a fist-sized orb. Inside, sparks of blue, silver and gold danced around one another. Jason reached out to accept it.

Item: [Projection Command: Presence] (transcendent rank, legendary)

The authority to control the presence of an expression of transcendent power.
(consumable, magic core).

- Effect: Gain control over the presence of your transcendent power, denying mortals the power to perceive it.
- Uses remaining: 1/1

“Thank you,” Jason said as he absorbed it into his inventory for later.

“You realise it’s only a stop-gap measure. A way to hide yourself while you get a handle on interacting with the mortal world. You will need to get a handle on that if you don’t want to be a god of chaos.”

“Still not a god.”

“Is there really a difference?”

“Well, someday this planet will die and you gods with it.”

Dominion let out a wincing chuckle.

“That’s a horrible thing to say.”

“Sorry.”

“Also, I know you’re new to operating on a god level, but we tend to avoid the word ‘poo.’ It doesn’t convey the dignity we’re going for.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Why did you really come here, Jason? You didn’t need me to tell you that there’s nothing you can do about your would-be followers. The Adventure Society is watching them, as are several churches, including mine. Even you aren’t oblivious enough to not have guessed that.”

“What do you mean, even me?”

“I said what I said. Why did you come to see me, Jason?”

Jason grimaced, not answering immediately.

“On Pallimustus, I’m not an outlier. This prime avatar is just gold rank. If I try going rampant, there are forces that will spank me for it. I’ve gotten away with a lot by being too important to someone or other to just get snuffed out, but I’m immortal now. It’s easy enough to kill my avatar and give me a quarter-century time out.”

“Ah. Your concern is the realm of your birth. The relative power you will have there.”

“Yes. I don’t know if there’s anyone on Earth stronger than I am now. Boris, probably. Maybe Rufus. But that only makes it worse. It’ll be me and all my friends. We could probably conquer the world for a Sunday Fun Day. Just the possibility of that is going to get people making drastic choices.”

“Yes. Enough personal power makes you a political power, whether you like it or not. Every high ranker has to learn that lesson, but you’re not practising with wooden swords, are you?”

“No. And it’s going to be so much worse on Earth. Here, the cultures have adapted to individuals with so much power. Over there, power has always been collective. There have always been those who concentrated that power, but there were limits. They always needed people to make it work.”

“As I see it, you have two choices. Conquer your world, or stand apart from it. Above it. Like a god. You have to rule them, or make them realise that you are so far above them that you have no interest in their little games. Anything in between and it will be chaos.”

“No half measures.”

“No half measures,” Dominion agreed. “When you act — however you act — it must be definitive. Beyond challenge. And when you refrain from acting, you must be beyond question.”

“How can I be beyond question? There will always be those who doubt and disagree.”

“When I say beyond question, I do not mean a questions of morals or values but of power. Make them see that they are nothing before you. That when you choose action, they cannot stop you. That when you choose inaction, they cannot compel you. Whether you are their ruler or their god, to see you, they must always look up.”

“Might makes right.”

“Yes. You don’t like it, I know, but it is the reality. Civilisation is built on not just ideals, but the power to enforce them. And there are always hands in which that power

disproportionately rests. The moment you arrive on Earth, those hands will be yours. So, try not to bring down civilisation.”

“Thanks.”

Dominion grinned.

“You didn’t come to me for easy answers.”

“It would have been nice, though.”

“Wouldn’t it just. Speaking of power, though, there’s some knowledge that Knowledge might not want you to know.”

“And what’s that?”

“She can peek into the head of your prime avatar, but not your true self. The living universe.”

“My consciousness is seated in the prime avatar. Isn’t that the same thing?”

“No. You can keep things from your avatar, if you don’t want them disseminated amongst the gods. Knowledge can be such a gossip.”

“By which you mean the goddess of Knowledge likes to spread knowledge.”

“It was more fun the way I said it.”

Jason gave Dominion a curious look.

“No one has ever said that to me before. Can you teach me to hide things from my avatar?”

“Someone is already lined up for that. For now, just enjoy yourself. Your friends are about to start arriving.”