

## Chapter 267

### A Better Pants Solution

Jason regained consciousness surrounded by a fiery, transcendent energy. It immediately vanished and dropped him to the floor. The feel of cold tile on his body told him that he was naked, which he quickly confirmed by pushing himself into a sitting position and doing a quick visual inspection.

There were a bunch of system windows but he minimised them for the moment as he looked himself over. There was no light in the windowless room but his perception power let him see perfectly in the dark. He seemed intact, but feeling the cool air on his head, he patted it and realised that his hair had once again callously abandoned him. He thought it might be because hair was dead material, but so were fingernails, as far as he knew, and those were still present.

“Weird. Still, you’re alive, unexpectedly. Take the win.”

His body still carried the scars of his previous encounters. The long scar across his abdomen from the elemental tyrant; the many small scars where shards of star seed had been forced out of his flesh. They were familiar, but there were new ones as well. His chest was marked by a series of roughly circular scars where the Builder’s spikes had impaled his body. All in all, his torso was a mess.

He got to his feet, memories swirling through his head. The last thing he remembered was charging through the window, the pain of the stone spikes spearing into his body. The mad whirl as he fell, then fading into darkness, only to wake up wherever he now was. His brain was telling him it had only been moments since he fell from the tower, but his soul was telling him otherwise.

Jason didn’t truly remember the original battle for his soul against the Builder. He had some mixed-up, hazy recollections as the star seed took over, then was forced out of his brain. The true battle had been in the spiritual realm, his soul a small ship rocked by the stormy seas of the Builder’s will. Only by outlasting the star seed and cutting off the Builder had he been able to survive, but there were no clear memories of the confrontation. What remained were the feelings imprinted on his soul.

He had a similar sense now, of his soul having experienced an encounter for which his mind had not been present. He felt a compelling sense of having been with someone else, someone who should be present, yet he was alone. He spread his aura out over the entire building, his aura strength more than up for the task. He sensed nothing but small animals, birds, rats and bugs.

Mentally shaking off the odd feeling, he examined his surroundings. He was in a dilapidated room that was tiled on the walls and floor, completely empty except for Jason himself. The air was stale and clammy, with a taste of unhealthy growth on the air, like fungus or mould. There was a set of swinging double doors with small windows set into them. There was a lingering magic that was definitely the force that had delivered him here. It was fading quickly but he sensed the transcendent strength of it. By contrast, the ambient magic around him was otherwise incredibly anaemic, even compared to Greenstone. That was the default, for as far as his magical senses extended.

He was trying to collect his thoughts when he felt something building within him that he had experienced enough to recognise as a skill evolution. Given what he had been through, it was hardly surprising, although one thing was new. Instead of the blue-grey light of iron rank, the radiance that shining from within his body was an amber colour.

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➤ [Outworlder racial ability \[Inventory\] has evolved to \[Spirit Vault\]](#).

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Jason only glanced at the notice before minimising it with the others. He had too much to deal with as it was, sending his mind reeling. His team, his death and revival, the strange discordance between his mind and his soul. He needed time to spread everything out into manageable chunks that he could process.

He had no idea of what fate had befallen his team. He was almost certain he had bought them enough time to complete their task, but how long they survived afterwards was up in the air. Had Clive been fast enough to open the portal before the Builder's wrath caught up with them? He had been confident enough in Clive's ability to knock out a speedy ritual that he threw away his life to give him the chance, but there were no certainties. Jason had no regrets, knowing the lives that failure would have cost if the world engineers were awakened.

"Okay," he told himself, rubbing his hands over his face to shake the lingering sopor. "Take stock, formulate a plan of action. What do I need and how do I get it? I need pants. Again. I need hair. Well, I want hair. I need to know what happened and where I am."

Jason had a better pants solution than the last time he'd unexpectedly arrived somewhere, naked and bald. With a thought, dark mist engulfed him before disappearing as quickly as it had come, leaving Jason garbed in one of his prepared outfits. He went with a smart casual suit in the Vitesse style that looked much like a casual suit from his own world.

It was one of many outfits supplied for his winter wardrobe by Gilbert, although he looked forward to replacing everything with bronze-rank apparel once he got back to Greenstone. The iron-rank clothes had basic self-cleaning and repair enchantments, along with some very light protection. At bronze-rank, not only would those enchantments be stronger but it was more cost-effective to incorporate other utility magic.

With his clothes sorted out, he moved onto hair, carefully applying Jory's hair-growth cream. He had no doubt that the result was an unruly mop, but it would suffice until he found a hairdresser.

Meeting those simple needs left him feeling much more in control of his circumstances. He thought back to when he had first woken up in a new world, naked, bald and confused. Just the question of pants had been a tribulation, let alone the larger questions.

Now, Jason was confident that he would better handle those larger questions the way he better handled the issue of pants. To figure out what happened, he started pulling up the system messages.

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- You have died.
  - All equipment has been returned to your inventory.
  - [World-Phoenix Token] has been consumed.

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“Bugger me. That explains how I survived, I guess; I didn't.”

He only had a vague recollection of that system box appearing as everything faded out.

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- You have been reborn.
  - You have received the blessing of the World-Phoenix.
  - If you accept the blessing, your outworlder racial ability [Astral Affinity] will evolve to [Nirvanic Transfiguration].
  - If you reject the blessing, your ability will remain unchanged and can be evolved by normal means or other blessings in the future.

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Jason paced back and forth. Coming back from the dead was a pleasant surprise. The World-Phoenix token had always been a mystery, but in hindsight he felt it should have been obvious. Knowledge had told him that he lacked the faith to use it. He finally understood, since killing yourself to trigger it would require a lot of faith in it working.

Jason stopped pacing as realisation passed through him like a bolt of lightning. He was focusing on the token bringing him back from death, the startling function momentarily

pushing the function he already knew about from his mind. The moment he remembered, his whole body tingled with anticipation and he couldn't open his map fast enough. His eyes immediately shot to the listing of his current location.

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➤ **Zone: Casselton West Regional Hospital [abandoned] (maternity ward).**

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He stared at the words like a deer in headlights. After a long, stunned moment he turned his eyes to the map itself and started zooming out. He expanded out from the hospital to the whole town, then the whole Casselton region. There was his home town, Casselton Beach. Large portions of the map were uncovered; most the of the region, as he had travelled through most of it at one time or another. He kept expanding out, through the mid north coast, all of New South Wales, then the whole of Australia. When he zoomed out to the whole world, the continents were all where they should be instead of the funhouse mirror of the magic world's geography.

Jason stared for a long time, not daring to believe. Then he closed the map, pushed through what he now recognised as heavy hospital doors and started rushing through the abandoned hospital. He had been born there but it had been closed down some fifteen years ago, now mostly a place for High School kids to come and smoke. It had been emptied out, leaving nothing to obstruct him as he rushed to find a window.

He found a patient ward, the windows opaque from years without cleaning. Without hesitating, he grabbed his sword from his inventory and smashed the scabbard into the window, sending glass raining down outside. He was on the fourth floor looking out on the semi-industrial part of West Casselton where the hospital had been located. It was deep into the night and the sky beat down with rain. Clouds obscured the moon and stars, but street lights reflected off the wet asphalt street. On the other side of the road was a takeaway store he remembered, closed for almost as long as the hospital. Next to it was the main depot for the Casselton regional bus service.

"I'm home."

The words came out in a tremulous whisper, as if he were scared that to say them would somehow make them untrue. His mind was once again sent staggering.

Jason's arrival in the magical world was a stark dividing line. What came before was so removed from what came after that the two seemed inimicable. Yet now he looked at his old world with his new eyes. The darkness did not obscure his sight, which was sharper than ever before. Colours had depth and nuance he had never realised, the air carried a complexity of scents he never realised. He could taste the ozone tang of water

on the power cables, smell the grass of the overgrown hospital grounds. The damp and mould of the disused hospital interior, and even a lingering trace of disinfectant, some fifteen years after it was last used.

His brother, Kaito, had once gotten reckless with his bicycle when Jason was nine years old. He was stuck spending a few days in the hospital, with Jason's sister driving him in every day to visit. Afterwards they would get chips at the takeaway store across the road. Now, under Jason's powerful new perception, the familiar store seemed almost alien.

He took a long, deep breath. The ramifications of coming back were like a sudden storm at sea. He had no idea how to navigate what would be disorienting at best and deadly dangerous at worst. The things he had learned and the things he could do represented a fundamental shift in the general understanding of reality. His very existence would be an opportunity to the ruthless and a threat to those who already claimed to have all the answers.

Those were just his concerns for the world he found himself back in. He had further concerns over his adoptive world. Most pressing was that he would have no idea how his team fared until he found his way back across the dimensional barriers of both worlds and the astral void between. He was determined to do so, but had little idea of how.

Did they all survive? Did they know he had revived in his own world? While he had discussed the World-Phoenix token in broad terms with some of them, he played that particular card close to his chest. In any case, even he hadn't known the specifics. Only Knowledge had the full truth and he would make no prediction about what the goddess would do.

Those concerns were only peripheral compared to what he had to deal with immediately. He had no idea what his situation would be coming home. Did people think he was dead? How was he going to explain everything? What did he even need to explain? For all he knew, time moved at different paces between worlds. He may have been gone a week of subjective time or ten years.

Then there were his arrangements going forward. Whatever his circumstances, he wasn't going to go back to the stationary store and ask for his job back. He had a pile of solid gold in his inventory but that wasn't the same as having money.

"I can't just rock up to the royal mint with thirty million worth of gold bullion and no explanation of where it came from. They'll think I'm a drug dealer."

Jason didn't know much about the gold trade in Australia, or anywhere else, for that matter, but he did know there was an amount of regulation. A scrap gold buyer might be

largely overlooked, but if he dropped an unmarked ten kilo bar at a booth in shopping centre, they would probably call the police.

The larger gold exchanges were watched more carefully. A retail employee who went missing for a year and a half, then showed up with a bunch of gold bars he couldn't explain the origins of would quickly find himself in a room with federal officers. Maybe he could find a shady one willing to make a backroom deal, but Jason's ignorance would make any such attempt fraught with peril.

Jason could have used a sounding board but Shade was locked away within his soul. His familiars had retreated into his soul at the time he died, and he could still feel their spirits within his soul. Their vessels were no longer present in his body, however, which allowed him to draw certain conclusions.

Jason had come a long way in his understanding of magic, with Clive guiding his studies. His focus, like Clive's, had been on astral magic, but he still had a solid grounding in general magical theories. This gave him a better understanding of the processes involved with his summoned familiars.

His familiar's vessels hadn't been literally contained in his blood, shadow and aura. Jason's magical body, like that of anyone iron-rank or above, was composed of the biomass that made it up and the magical matrix that governed that biomass. The magical matrix was responsible for the ways in which the body interacted with both the world around it and the soul within it.

A familiar's vessel, on being summoned, was anchored to physical reality by attaching itself to aspects of the summoner's matrix, rather than the biomass. This was the reason that summoned familiar's gave enhanced abilities when their vessels were subsumed, as they enhanced the capabilities of the aspect to which they were attached.

In Jason's current situation, that knowledge allowed him to make a deduction. Since the spirits of his familiars were ensconced comfortably within his soul but their vessels were gone, his revival had been in a whole new body. He had no idea if that was a function of the World-Phoenix token or just of his returning to his world. Any soul entering a world would build a new body for itself, as Jason's had when he first became an outworlder.

If it was because of being an outworlder, it hadn't changed his racial abilities the way it had the first time. His soul had already been affected by passing through the astral, unconsciously drawing on the astral's power to grant itself the tools it would need to survive. His racial gifts remained as they were, aside from the one that had just ranked up.

Jason pulled a chair out of his inventory and sat down. It was time to formulate a plan that went beyond pants. He went back to his original questions.

“What do I need and how do I get it?”

He needed information. If nothing had gone wonky with interdimensional time-streams, it should be somewhere near the start of winter. The rain pounding down outside the broken window let in a damp cold that certainly fit, but he would need to be more accurate than that. He enjoyed the bleak cold coming in through the window, having spent the last year and a half roaming scorching desert, sweltering delta and hot, wet jungle.

He also needed to know what happened regarding his status. Did the world think he was missing or dead? Was his outworlder self some kind of magical clone, with his original still living his life, oblivious.

A lot of those answers could be had with an internet connection. Unfortunately, he had no phone, no money and no transport. He was hesitant to call in on family to get them, at least until he had a better understanding of his circumstances. Then he remembered a certain member of his family and reconsidered.

Jason had two uncles, one of which was estranged from the family. Hiro Asano was the family's black sheep due to his involvement in organised crime. Hiro might simultaneously be a useful source of information and a method to convert some of his gold into cash. He would get well-below market rates for an illegal gold sale, but he just needed enough money to get by for a while.

The only problem was that Hiro was in Sydney, hundreds of kilometres to the south. In theory, Jason could portal his way south, reaching Sydney in a few hops. He knew from Clive that all portal powers had the same range of around forty kilometres per rank at bronze, including rank zero. Fortunately, Jason's Path of Shadows ability was one of his highest rank powers, giving him a range of roughly two hundred kilometres. His only concern was if the power would work at all.

Normally, portal abilities would take someone to any place they had been. Jason had never thought to ask if that included places they had been before they gained the power, or even before they were an essence user. It was something he would need to test.

That, at least, gave Jason a tentative plan. Test his portal ability, cash up and get the lay of the land. It would do for his immediate, practical concerns. That left the more magical concerns and he resumed looking through the windows he had minimised.

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➤ You have been reborn.

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He wondered why had he appeared in the abandoned hospital. It had been closed for years, after the new big regional hospital opened in Castle Heads. Was it random? If so, that would be quite the coincidence, arriving in the same hospital he had been born in.

Something occurred to him and he backtracked to the room he had arrived in. On the outside of the room was a faded sign. MATERNITY THEATRE.

Jason pushed the doors open and went through. He hadn't arrived on the floor, but in the air, where he immediately fell to the floor. He guessed the height was about right for a hospital bed.

"Was I reborn in the exact same place I was born the first time?"



## Chapter 268

### Time to Front Up

Jason went back to the chair he had left by the broken window and sat down. The cool, clean air coming in as the rain continued to hammer down was a stark improvement over what had been sealed away in the old hospital. Before he made a move, he needed to go through the system messages that he had been ignoring. He pulled up the first one.

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- You have entered a region of magical desolation. The levels of magical density and magical saturation are extremely low, insufficient to produce spontaneous magical manifestations.
  - Stamina recovery reduced by 50%.
  - Health Recovery reduced by 75%.
  - Mana recovery reduced by 99%.
  - Consuming a spirit coin of your rank or ten spirit coins of one rank lower will restore your recovery rates to normal for eight hours. This duration is reduced by using active magic abilities.
  - Rituals and summoning abilities require spirit coins to enact, in addition to any spirit coin cost they already have. Rituals will be unable to function without artificially enhancing the density of local ambient magic.
  - Summoned familiars will need to consume a spirit coin of their rank or ten coins of one rank lower to sustain their vessels. Consumption of spirit coins will allow them to maintain their vessels outside of the summoner for one day before requiring additional coins. This duration is reduced by using active magic abilities.

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Clive had long surmised that the dimensional membrane of Jason's world was much more restrictive than that of Clive's own. The reduced levels of magic it would allow to seep in from the astral would account for the absence of magic that Jason had described. The analysis of Jason's interface ability was completely consistent with that hypothesis, reflecting a level of magic so low as to be, for most practical purposes, absent entirely.

The absence of magical manifestation meant no monsters, no essences and no awakening stones. Unless someone already had magical tools and abilities, interacting with the world's meagre level of magic would be impossible.

Fortunately, Jason was not short on spirit coins. The astral space had inverted the normal ratio of shops to monsters, leaving Jason with silver spirit coins numbered in the low thousands. He had enough bronze coins to use indefinitely, while his iron coin supply was enough to swim through like Scrooge McDuck.

“The Builder could learn a lot from Disney,” Jason muttered to himself, opening up his inventory to take out a coin. Doing so, he noticed that his supply of monster cores now occupied currency counters like spirit coins, instead of taking up space in his inventory slots. He presumed it was one of the effects of his inventory power evolving. It didn't free up a lot of slots, given that the amount of cores he could store per slot had expanded greatly when he reached bronze rank. He currently had a thousand bronze-rank cores and dozens of silver-rank cores. As for iron-rank cores, he had long ago ditched them, even if it only freed up the one inventory slot.

Spirit coins and monster cores were only the beginning of the treasures that had his inventory bursting at the seams. Between looting monsters and scavenging the astral space, Jason and his team had dumped all their iron-rank loot to make room for the good stuff. The treasure had been split between Jason, Humphrey, Clive and Belinda, who each had their own storage spaces. Even carrying just a quarter of the team's haul, Jason had essences and awakening stones enough to produce a dozen essence users with full sets of abilities.

The essence users in question would be rather uniform, as the environment of the astral space produced a lot of duplicate essences. Half of them were plant essences, with most of the others spread between venom, might and a handful of animal essences. Those were all common-rarity essences, but he also had a few uncommon growth and life essences, plus a precious handful of more exotic ones.

The rest of the haul was filled out by various magic items they had picked up. Most had been kept for selling, the team already having claimed anything they wanted for themselves. There was even more in the cloud house, which could serve as a large, if less convenient dimensional space. That was where they had kept items that would occupy the most space in their storage abilities, along with things they had a lot of but knew they wouldn't be using. Basic bronze-rank weapons and armour weren't fancy, but there was always a market of newly-ranked-up adventurers looking for relatively inexpensive gear.

He moved on to the next system window.

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#### Title: [Indomitable]

- Your repeated defiance in the face of more powerful enemies and willingness to sacrifice everything for a cause has marked your soul. Your resistance to aura suppression is further enhanced and ignores rank disparity.
- Your aura signature has changed. Your unwavering resolve floods your aura and can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power or when

projecting your aura. Allies within your aura have increased resistance to aura suppression.

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More than just the new scars on his chest, Jason could feel that his soul had once again passed through the crucible. He had been told that soul scars were rare, yet his soul had been battered and beaten to the point that his entire torso was a landscape of ragged marks and lumpen scar tissue. Even though his body was brand new, the tribulations of his soul were made manifest upon it.

He wondered if the deepest damage remained hidden. Looking into the rainy night of his own world, he wasn't sure if he belonged after what he had become. Not as a magic being, but as a person. He was no longer human, but how much of his humanity had he thrown away?

The first person he killed was Landemere Vane, by accident in a mad scramble to defend himself. It had shaken him to the core, leaving him a near-catatonic wreck. It was not the last, that first day, and Rufus had warned him that it would only be the beginning. He had been so self-righteous, looking down on Rufus, Farrah and Gary for their callous attitude, resolving to be different. Now he had killed as much as any of them, unsure if it was his naiveté or his decency that he discarded along the way.

He would never know how many Ustei tribesman had fallen to his afflictions in the battle on the sand barge. He regretted his participation now, but that didn't bring the people he killed back to life. At the time he had been caught up in the wild rush of the adventuring life, not even considering the reality of what he was doing. That day he had just followed orders, killing wantonly and hadn't even felt bad. So much blood on his hands, yet he'd been excited about his first attribute advancement instead of horrified at the slaughter he'd participated in.

Maybe there hadn't been a better solution and the battle with the Ustei was inevitable. It was certainly true that they had to be stopped, but was any real attempt made at a peaceful solution? He wasn't foolish enough to think he was done with killing, but he at least wanted to be confident in himself that it was the right thing, instead of just accepting the assurance of others.

He had made other mistakes on his search to find a balance within the violence. His callousness had grown and people had died at his hands that shouldn't have. The third-rate adventurers Thadwick sent after him could have been sent packing with the same ease that he slaughtered half their number. He had taken their lives, caught up in his own dark mythology. Killing had become easy, casual almost. He had told himself that it had

been necessary to send a message to the next people who came after him. He ultimately realised he was caught up in his own ego and power.

Rufus had warned him that he would need to harden himself to the realities of a violent world. It was simply necessity when monsters threatened innocent people and power turned the selfish into tyrants. What none of them had warned Jason about was going too far and become one of those tyrants himself. The god Dominion had seen it, and apparently approved.

He had tried to balance himself out. He hadn't wanted to go after the desert bandits that took over a town, because he knew it would be too easy to justify the killing to himself. Yet, he still let himself be talked into it. The final count of bandits he killed came to thirty-seven. Three dozen people in a single afternoon. He could not say he went unaffected by the magnitude of his actions but the most damning thing was that he didn't regret them. It was a grim job carried out with grim satisfaction.

The person that arrived in the magic world was not the person that returned. Looking out at the dark, starless sky of his own Earth, he couldn't help but wonder if his old world had a place for him. He wasn't sure he deserved one.

Jason shook his head to dispel the dark thoughts. For all his dark deeds, he had done a lot of good as well. All he could do was move forward and continue trying to do his best. In the meantime, he brought up the next system window.

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- You have received the blessing of the World-Phoenix.
  - If you accept the blessing, your outworlder racial ability [Astral Affinity] will evolve to [Nirvanic Transfiguration].
  - If you reject the blessing, your ability will remain unchanged and can be evolved by normal means or other blessings in the future.
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He had no idea what the World-Phoenix wanted from him, or why it had slipped him a token as his soul was dragged through the astral on his way to becoming an outworlder. According to Clive, the World-Phoenix's area of concern was dimensional stability. It's interests lay in events that impacted the astral and whole realities, with little care for mortal affairs. When the World-Phoenix did act on that small a scale, it was oblique and subtle. Was the World-Phoenix trying to make Jason the butterfly whose wings led to the rise of a hurricane?

Jason had no insights into the World-Phoenix's objectives or intentions for him, which was exactly the problem. Entities existing in realms he couldn't imagine were playing games on a board he was too small to see. He had no interest in being someone's pawn and, if he could find a way, would rather flip the board over entirely.

According to Clive, there was no way for a great astral being's blessing to be used as a means to control the recipient, beyond ordinary methods like gratitude and obligation. The ability, once granted, could not be revoked like that from a divine awakening stone. Some great astral beings were even known to give blessings to those that opposed their interests, when their ideologies meshed, nonetheless. Jason himself had already received a power evolution from a blessing, courtesy of a Reaper token. His system had not asked for confirmation at that time; apparently his use of the token counted as consent. He looked over the description of his potential new power.

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Ability: [Nirvanic Transfiguration]

- This ability will be evolved from the ability [Astral Affinity].
- Your body and soul will be combined into a gestalt entity both physical and spiritual in nature. This state will grant inherent resistance to effects that utilise the soul-body disconnect.
- The nature of your new body will render you immune to resurrection effects, including those of high-rank healing magic. If your body is disincorporated, your soul will return to a purely spiritual state, unable to reinhabit a physical form or re-enter a physical reality. This prevents the natural formation of an outworlder body on entering a physical reality. These restrictions will change on reaching diamond rank.
- When suffering lethal damage, instead of dying, your new body will undergo a nirvanic rebirth, returning to a state of full integrity. This effect cannot be triggered again until you have increased in rank from the last time it was used. This ability will change on reaching diamond rank.
- The strength of your aura will significantly increase.
- Your resistance to hostile dimension effects and disruptive force damage will be increased. This is an enhancement of the [Astral Affinity] ability.
- The potency of your dimensional abilities and transcendent damage will be increased. This is a legacy effect of the [Astral Affinity] ability.
- Physical reality around you will be more stable. You will be able to sense nearby astral space apertures and proto-astral spaces coterminous to your location.
- You will be able to traverse astral space apertures, including those that are closed or have been sealed.
- You will be able to directly enter proto-astral spaces coterminous with your location or directly leave a proto-astral space to a coterminous location.

- While within the astral you will be able to create and maintain a small zone of physical reality around you. This does not grant the ability to enter or traverse the astral.
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The power seemed wildly suspicious. For one thing, no racial gift Jason had heard of came close to that complexity. It was more akin to an essence ability after ranking up multiple times. For another, it seemed very specific. It was clearly designed to push Jason into certain directions, for reasons that remained hidden from him. Whatever the World-Phoenix's agenda, Jason was certain this power was designed to serve it.

Jason had two further misgivings. The major one was the removal of resurrection options. To someone from a world without magic, that might seem like a cheap cost, but Jason had already died twice. He knew full well that high-ranked healing magic had miraculous effects, to the point of bringing back the dead if the healer moved quickly enough.

While the nirvanic rebirth effect was some compensation, it would take Jason decades to reach diamond rank, even under the far-from-certain assumption that he would at all. In all that time, he would have only one chance to revive at each rank, compared to the potentially countless times a healer could bring him back from the brink.

His other concern was that it precluded using the outworlder effect of having his soul traverse the astral and form a new body in a new world. He didn't know if it was possible to engineer this effect without a transcendent power like the World-Phoenix token, but accepting this power would rule it out entirely.

That was not something Jason was comfortable with. His intention was to settle affairs with his family, then find a way back to the magical Earth. He had expected to be higher rank before that ever became an issue. Bronze-rank seemed too low to find a means of traversing worlds, and there weren't any monsters to grind his way up with on his own Earth. Figuring out how to artificially trigger an outworlder effect was the only idea he had, thus far.

Those concerns, plus a healthy scepticism about the agendas of great astral beings, left Jason unwilling to accept the power. The World-Phoenix certainly knew how to lay out tempting bait, however. Much of the ability seemed tailor made for taking the fight to the Builder's minions, which he suspected it was.

The question was why. Was it to push Jason into taking the ability, or was fighting the Builder the entire point? Why would a great astral being even go to the effort for someone like him? Surely there was no shortage of powerful, knowledgeable people who would be willing to act on the World-Phoenix's behalf. He was self aware enough to realise that his

ego was perhaps a touch over-sized, but even he would admit to being unremarkable on a cosmic scale.

Jason had no intention of accepting that power without answering at least some of those questions. He didn't flat out decline it, either. There didn't seem to be a time limit on the offer, and if there had been, it would have tipped him into rejecting it outright. For the moment he could just leave things as they were, leaving the decision for when he had more information.

Finally he moved on to the last window. This was a power evolution that he had received the old-fashioned way, by having the crap kicked out of him. He already had an instinctive sense of the power but Clive was right; having it all spelled out was extremely useful.

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#### Ability: [Spirit Vault]

- This ability is evolved from the ability [Inventory].
- You have a dimensional storage space.
- You may call up a gate and physically enter your dimensional storage space. Only you may enter; others cannot be invited or 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.

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"See, now that's how a power evolution should work. Not eighteen different things, no over-the-top effects. No getting killed, no agendas. Just a nice bit of extra utility, with that little bit of flair that makes you excited to check it out."

He stood up from his chair and waved a hand over the floor and in response, a line of darkness appeared. He gestured upwards and an obsidian arch rose up, filled with darkness.

"Aren't you familiar," he told it. He went to step through, then stopped, picked up his chair and carried it through with him.

He emerged from an identical arch into a luxurious gazebo, elaborately carved from marbled obsidian in swirling black and white. The gazebo was circular and had three more archways spaced equidistantly around it. The archway he had stepped through was filled with a starry void, while the next was filled with what looked like a vertical sheet of roiling

blood. After that was one filled with pure darkness, much like his normal portal arches. The last had the blue and orange eye nebula that was Gordon's signature filling it.

The floor was a tile mosaic that looked just like the personal crest on Jason's back; a daylight sky inside a cloak, surrounded by the night sky. More arresting was the environment in which the gazebo was located. Untethered from the ground, it floated through a dark, rain-filled sky. Neither rain nor wind encroached upon the gazebo's interior, despite the open sides. A large crystal that looked to have naturally grown down from the centre of the arched ceiling gave off a cool, pleasant light.

Outside of the gazebo, numerous objects orbited around it, glowing with transcendent light like stars shining in the dark. Looking at them, Jason realised that they were the items stored in his inventory. He threw out the chair he was holding as an experiment and it gained its own halo of light and it joined the other objects in orbit. Jason spied a stack of sandwiches, gathered together gently glowing. With a simple thought from Jason, one of the sandwiches separated itself and floated to his hand.

"Nice," he said, then took a bite.

He turned back to the archways, clearly associated with his three familiars.

"Alright, mates. Time to front up."

Items started flying into the gazebo, vanishing into the three archways. Jason had enough materials to summon Shade and Gordon once each, and Colin twice. Along with the material components being consumed, the required spirit coins came hurtling up and in from somewhere below the floating gazebo.

Leeches started spilling out of the bloody arch, forming a pile from which strips of ragged, bloody cloth emerged to start binding the pile into shape. Motes of blue and orange light started streaming out of the nebula arch like a swarm of fireflies, slowly coalescing into Gordon's form. A dark shape slowly pushed itself out through the final arch, taking the form of Shade. As his shadow familiar appeared, Jason's own shadow vanished. Additional bodies emerged from the arch, one after another, before melding together as one.

"It is good to see you alive again, Mr. Asano."

"Good to be seen," Jason said. "It comes as bit of a surprise."

"Not entirely," Shade said. "The World-Phoenix token in your possession was always a comfort to me, in regards to your safety."

"Wait," Jason said. "You knew?"

"Of course," Shade said, in his usual dignified tone. "I'm not a scrub



## 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 the 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 its 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 its 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 has not alleviated my confusion.”

“Do you have a turbo boost button?”

“I do not.”

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

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“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 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. My progenitor is not without a sense of reciprocity."

"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?"

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

- 
- 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.

- 
- 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 not 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 universes 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.”

## Chapter 270

### Some Secrets Change You Forever

Jason let Shade drive through the dark and the rain. The dark did not obscure his vision, but he trusted Shade more than himself to drive safely in the wet. He also didn't want to drive distracted; his visit home had left him contemplative and sober.

"We should do this trip again when the weather's better," he said. "And during the day. The Pacific Coast Drive is one of the greats."

As Jason's soul had grown stronger, the connection to his familiars had grown stronger in turn. Even with the current strength, the connection wasn't the equal of a bonded familiar, but he could feel them more than ever. They could likewise feel him and the emotional turmoil raging beneath his placid façade.

They did not know Jason's complicated family history, and he doubted Colin and possibly Gordon could even understand if they did. What they did understand was the feeling it engendered. He felt them urge him on with feelings of support, smiling as he sent back his own feelings of gratitude. It was a comfort to have his strange but loyal companions on side.

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Despite the wet conditions, Shade had no regard for speed limits and every confidence in his ability, so Jason had arrived in Sydney before the bars stopped accepting people. Sydney was also suffering a downpour, so Jason's umbrella was floating along behind him.

The Stone Wall was a bar in Sydney's King's Cross. A remnant of the wilder days before the lockout laws, it was a bastion of the old rough and dirty days. Working the door was a small mountain, in the form of a Māori dressed all in black.

"Hey, bro," the bouncer said. Despite his towering figure, he had a high-pitched voice. His thick New Zealand accent made his use of the word 'bro' friendly and amiable, rather than frat-boy douchebag. "How's your umbrella stay up like that?"

Jason glanced at the magic item floating next to him. "Probably magnets."

"Sweet. You coming inside?"

"I'm looking for Hiro Asano," Jason said. "Last I heard, he was running this place."

"No worries, bro; I'll give him a call. Who should I say is looking for him?"

"His nephew."

"Okay, give me a sec."

The big man fished a phone from his pocket and made a call.

“Hey, it’s Taika. I’ve got someone here looking for you. Says he’s your nephew.”

The bouncer looked Jason over.

“Good-looking half-Japanese bloke, yeah.”

“he covered the phone with his hand.

“Are you Kaito?” Taika asked

“I’m the other one. Jason.”

The bouncer went back to his call.

“He says he’s the other one. Yeah, Jason.”

The big man winced at whatever came through from the other end, then put his phone away.

“He’s says Jason is dead, bro. He sounded pretty angry that someone was claiming to be his dead nephew. Said he’s sending Growl down here. My advice to is make yourself scarce before he gets here.”

“Thanks, but I’m fine.”

“If you say so. I’m Taika, by the way. Like the director, but I don’t make films.”

“Jason Asano.”

“You really Hiro’s dead nephew?”

“The trick is to not stay dead.”

“I can see how that would be useful. You might be needing that soon.”

On cue, a hulking white guy came striding out of the bar. He wasn’t as big as Taika, but looked like a clump of muscle that gained sentience, bought a tank top and started getting tattoos.

“Is this the guy?” Growl asked in a voice that could have surfaced a gravel road.

“This is the guy,” Taika said.

“I thought you might have warned him to run,” Growl said.

“I did,” Taika said. “He responded with a casual lack of concern that suggests either he has no idea what he’s in for or that he knows something we don’t.”

Growl looked Jason up and down. Even after growing a few centimetres taller with his ascension to bronze rank, Jason was not a large man. His lean muscle was well hidden under the excellent drape of his suit.

“You think this guy is some kind of arse-kicker?” Growl asked sceptically.

“I’ve seen movies, bro. Huge white dude goes to beat up a little Asian bloke? He’s probably one of them secret kung-fu guys. Trained in a hidden mountain temple or something.”

Jason watched the exchange with a bemused smile.

“What are you smirking at?” Growl asked him. He grabbed Jason by the arm and dragged him towards an alley. Jason let himself be pulled along, out of sight of the street.

“Mr Asano doesn’t like people pretending to be his dead family members,” Growl said. “First, you’re going to tell me what you’re up to. Then I’m going to make very clear the degree to which Mr Asano is upset.”

“What I’m here for is easy,” Jason said with a sinister chuckle as his face took on a malevolent cant. “My job was to get you away from Asano while the others go in through the back.”

“What?” Growl asked, then his eyes went wide. He swore as he sprinted out of the alley. Jason followed at a casual stroll. When he reached Taika, the big man was looking at the door Growl had just barrelled through.

“Did you kung fu Growl?”

“I just told him a little porky pie,” Jason said, moving under the awning over the door and closing his umbrella. “Nice to meet you, Taika. I’m going to go in.”

“Okay, bro.”

Jason followed Growl’s aura through what turned out to be a loud and crowded bar. There was enough people that no one noticed the umbrella vanish as he returned it to his inventory. Growl had rushed past a pair of beefy men standing in front of a doorway, who blocked Jason’s way when he went to follow.

Jason couldn’t be bothered dealing with them, giving them just enough aura suppression to severely unnerve them without causing any real harm. The pair, suddenly terrified of Jason for reasons they didn’t understand, quickly moved out of his way. Jason went through the door and up the stairs, where he heard an angry voice.

“No, no one has come in through the back. With the security door back there, they’d have better luck coming through a wall. This is why you never move up, Growl. The only muscle you never work out is your damn brain!”

“Don’t be too hard on him, Uncle Hiro,” Jason said stepping into the office where Growl was looking sheepish. Sitting behind a desk was Jason’s uncle. Hiro’s criminal connections had made him a black sheep of the family and Jason hadn’t seen him since before he had left for university seven years ago.

“Jason?”

Hiro came around the desk, tilting his head back and forth as he examined Jason’s face.

“Is it really you?”

“It’s me, Uncle Hiro.”

Hiro blinked a couple of times, then collected Jason into a hug before letting him go, putting his hands on Jason’s shoulders.

“You can go, Growl.”

“Are you sure?” Growl asked.

“Yes, Thomas.”

Growl flinched at the use of his real name and slinked away.

“How did you get past the guys downstairs?” Hiro asked.

“I’m very intimidating,” Jason said unconvincingly.

Hiro closed the door behind Growl and waved Jason into a seat. Hiro’s office was decorated quite differently to the grimy aesthetic of the downstairs bar. It had exposed brick, stained wood and subdued art. His chair was old school leather, practically a throne. Jason’s own chair was very comfortable, by the standards of someone who didn’t own a house made of magic clouds.

“It’s incredible to see you Jason,” Hiro said. “Even before all this, it had been too long. The memorial service was the first time I saw your father in years. We keep in touch at least a little, now. Your grandmother still won’t have anything to do with me.”

“You did send a huge man to beat me up,” Jason said. “You aren’t exactly a model citizen.”

“I am sorry about that, but you handled Growl well enough. He’s not sharp, but that’s acceptable in a blunt instrument.”

“But he’s a giant tool either way,” Jason said.

“Still a smart-arse, I see.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I took a look at dumb-arse but decided to go the other way.”

Hiro chuckled.

“It’s definitely you, alright. You’ve changed a lot since I last saw you, though. You finally grew into that chin.”

“Why is everyone so focused on my chin?”

“Are you kidding? You could have drilled for oil with that thing. Did you have some work done?”

“What work?”

“Like chin-reduction surgery.”

“I did not have chin-reduction surgery!”

Hiro chuckled, then his face grew more serious.

“What happened to you, Jason? Where have you been? Why hasn’t anyone heard from you?”

“Those questions have very complicated answers,” Jason said. “For the moment, let’s just say that I’ve been doing some work in a place completely cut off from outside communication. I didn’t even know people thought I was dead until I talked to your guys downstairs.”

“Didn’t the rest of the family tell you?”

“You’re the only one who knows I’m back. What does everyone think happened to me?”

“There was a gas explosion in your building. It wiped out your apartment entirely and a good chunk of the one around yours, but you were the only death.”

“My building didn’t have gas service,” Jason said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

“That’s what your sister said. She threw up a big stink about it, but the feds were adamant.”

“Feds?”

“Your apartment blew up when there was one of those terrorist response exercises going on nearby. It was one of the first ones, actually.”

“What terrorist response exercises?”

“You really were out of contact weren’t you?” Hiro asked. “It’s been going on for more than a year, now. The army has been deploying forces all over the country for what they’re calling terrorist response exercises. It’s been happening in other countries, too, all over the world. There’s all this speculation going around that there’s some kind of anticipated attack, but more than a year later and nothing. But since one of them took place near your apartment at the same time, the federal police got involved.”

“And?”

“A lightning quick investigation,” Hiro said. “They said it was a gas explosion and closed it out by the end of the day. Erika pushed for more information, but the feds pushed back. Hard, from what I hear. They told her to back off in no uncertain terms.”

“Well that’s only very suspicious,” Jason mused. Clearly, the destruction was caused by the astral event that sent him hurtling into another reality, but why were people covering it up? Was there someone out there who knew about magic and spent their time hiding any manifestations of it?

“Why come to me?” Hiro asked. “I’m flattered, but why not your parents or your sister?”

“Like I said, I’ve been out of contact. I need to know what I’m walking into before I make my grand reappearance. I figured you could help me, and would be more willing to take ‘please don’t ask’ for an answer.”

“Of course I’ll help.”

“Is Erika living in Mum and Dad’s house now?”

“She is,” Hiro said. “You went by?”

“I took a look, but didn’t go in. Where are Mum and Dad living? Don’t tell me they moved to Tasmania, too?”

Hiro face took on an awkward expression.

“Sorry, Jason, but your parents divorced a year ago. I’m not really sure of the details, but your father bought a large property as a landscaping project and he’s been living in a little cottage on-site. Your mother moved up to Castle Heads.”

“Damn,” Jason said.

“So, what do you need?” Hiro asked. “Some cash? A place to stay while you get organised?”

“They would both be great,” Jason said. “I’ve been working, but they didn’t pay me in Australian dollars.”

“You can’t do a currency exchange?”

Jason placed a gold bar on Hiro’s desk.

“I was hoping you could help me move it,” Jason said. “Obviously I don’t expect market rates.”

“Jesus, Jason. What have you gotten caught up in? I’m meant to be the dodgy one.”

“I haven’t been doing anything criminal,” Jason said. “Except secretly leaving the country, I guess, but that wasn’t really my choice. I’ve been doing security work. In Africa.”

Hiro reached forward, using both hands to heft the ten kilo bar that Jason had lightly rested on the table with one.

“You were paid a bar of gold to secretly leave the country, and what? Be a security guard?”

“Security contractor.”

“A mercenary? Jason, do you have any idea how insane that sounds?”

Jason laughed.

“Uncle, you’re smart enough to know that I’m skirting around the edges of the truth. It isn’t that I want to hide anything from you, but that the reality would make what I’m telling you now seem as extraordinary as eating a microwave dinner and going to bed early.”



“Jason, seeing you eat a microwave dinner would be extraordinary. Why don’t you try me?”

Jason shook his head. “I’m not looking to lie to you, Uncle Hiro, but I need to give things more consideration to before I start telling anyone anything.”

“Alright,” Hiro said. He took a money clip from a drawer and tossed it over the desk to Jason. Then he tapped his fingers on the gold bar.

“Leave this with me and I’ll see what I can do. It’s not my area, so I’ll have to ask around. Just so you know, I may get asked where it came from by people I can’t keep the answer from.”

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “I can handle people.”

Hiro looked at his nephew. There had always been an insecurity buried under the layers of lunatic wit, but no trace of that remained. There was an almost domineering confidence in the way he carried himself. In his line of work, Hiro had developed a good instinct for dangerous people. Those instincts were screaming at him right now.

“I’ll have Taika take you somewhere you can get some sleep,” Hiro said. “I have a townhouse I keep for important guests. Do you have a phone?”

“No.”

“I’ll see you get one. A laptop, too. If you need anything else, Taika will sort you out.”

“Thank you, Uncle.”

“You know, I’d like to hear what really happened, some time.”

“I’m not sure you’d be glad once you did,” Jason said. “Some secrets change you forever.”

## Chapter 271

### It Would Be Weirder If Magic Wasn't Responsible

Annabeth Tilden was woken by her phone.

"Damn it, Anna."

So was her wife. Annabeth snatched the phone off the night stand and stumbled into the bathroom, closing the door before turning on the light and answering.

"What?" she answered grumpily.

"Boss, I was going over the grid feed for the night and I found something. The monitoring agent passed it off as a glitch, which is why I'm only seeing it now, but I took a closer look and I think it warrants investigation."

Annabeth groaned but nodded to herself.

"Alright. Run me through it, Ketiv."

Ketivan wasn't in the habit of making unfounded leaps, with Annabeth placing a lot of trust in her analytical abilities.

"We got a hit on the grid on the Mid North Coast but it definitely wasn't an event. It was incredibly localised and lasted for less than a second."

"That sounds like a random reaction spike. What makes this different to the ones we see all day, every day?"

"Two things," Ketivan said. "One is that there was an almost identical hit in France at the same time. The other is the strength of the reaction. The grid registered it as being above category five."

"There is no above category five."

"No, ma'am."

"There's only been the one category four and the Poms needed a Brimstone missile to deal with it."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Actually, they needed several."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Alright," Annabeth said. "Send an investigation team. If there's something there, look into it personally."

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"Shade," Jason whispered. "Bring the car around. Make sure there's room for our hefty new friend."

Several shadow bodies discreetly separated themselves from Jason's shadow as he made his way outside, where Growl was taking over from Taika on the door.

"It's not like we'll get a lot of traffic just before lock up when it's coming down like this on a weeknight," Growl was saying. They glanced out as the rain continued pouring down on the street.

Jason nodded a greeting at the pair of huge men, and held a hand out for Growl to shake.

"No hard feelings, mate?"

Growl clasped Jason's hand in his own meaty paw and shook it.

"I'm just glad I didn't handle you in the alley," Growl said. "Mr Asano wouldn't have been happy once he realised you really were family."

"No worries," Jason said. "I wouldn't have beaten you up too badly."

Taika laughed and Growl nodded at the door Jason had just emerged from.

"What did you do to the guys inside?" Growl asked. "You scared the crap out of them,"

"It's a body language trick," Jason said. "It triggers instinctual fear reactions."

"I told you, bro," Taika said. "He learned secret kung fu in the mountains. I'll go get a car."

"We'll take mine," Jason said, nodding at the black car pulling up in front of the bar. Unlike Shade's previous sports car form, he was now in the shape of a sleek but roomy four-door sedan, although it still maintained aggressive lines.

"That's a choice ride," Taika said. "You got a driver or something?"

"Or something," Jason said.

In the dark and the rain, the windows looked like black glass and they couldn't see inside. Jason went around to the driver side door and Taika opened the passenger door. He looked around the interior of the car.

"You got one of them self-driving cars," Taika. "I didn't know you could buy them yet."

"I know a guy," Jason said. "It's not strictly allowed, though, so keep it under your hat, yeah?"

"No worries," Taika said and clambered inside. The massive Māori man was a snug fit, but settled in comfortably. "This is nice. These seats are really plush."

Taika directed Jason on a short drive to what looked like a dilapidated brick building, but the heavy security door had a gleaming keypad beside it. Taika punched in a code, telling Jason what it was so he could come and go freely. The interior was a stark contrast with the outside, the old brick storehouse had been renovated into a modern, open-plan

townhouse. The downstairs was divided into sections by furniture, gym equipment, free-standing bookcases and a quartz top kitchen island. The floors were polished wood and a set of stairs led to a mezzanine upper level.

“There’s one bathroom through that door,” Taika pointed out, “and one more upstairs with the bedrooms.”

Taika pointed out the computer tablet on the wall.

“All the smart home functions go through that tablet,” he said. “There’s a computer upstairs, but I’ll bring a laptop and phone in the morning. There’s food in the fridge and you can order delivery through the tablet.”

“Thanks. I’ll have to thank Uncle Hiro for putting me up somewhere nice.”

“I think he’ll be happy having you around for a bit,” Taika said. “I know he regrets being estranged from family.”

“I know the feeling,” Jason said. “Do you have family nearby, Taika?”

“I do, yeah. Me and my brother got caught up in some gang stuff back in New Zealand. Dad got us out and brought us over here. Now I do security for Mr Asano.”

“You like working for my uncle?”

“It’s honest work, mostly,” Taika said. “Mr Asano runs the legit businesses. It’s good to have someone out front with clean hands, yeah? We even work with the cops sometimes.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, bro. If a rich white kid takes some dodgy eccies and has a seizure, that’s as bad for the cops as for us. There’s no stopping the party drugs, so they look the other way and we make sure they find the blokes flogging off the bad stuff. The cops get to make some arrests and we stay out of trouble.”

“Good to know. Thanks, Taika.”

“Boss said that I’m at your disposal for as long as you’re in town. I’ll have that phone and computer for you in the morning. If you need anything tonight, I’m in the apartment building next door, in 2C. Your uncle lives in the penthouse.”

Jason waited until Shade, who had a body hidden in Taika’s shadow, told him that the big man had arrived in his apartment.

“Alright,” Jason said. “Let’s go out.”

\*\*\*

When Taika entered the townhouse in the morning he found that Jason had moved the dining table to create a central open space, which he was making use of. Wearing loose pants and a plain tank top, Jason went through a graceful and deliberate kata with

an impressive sword in his hand. On the sound system, some kind of meditative music was playing.

Jason gave no indication of having noticed Taika's arrival, which was novel to Taika. Most people reacted to the arrival of a hundred and fifty kilos of Māori. Taika moved over to the lounge area and placed the phone and laptop boxes he was carrying onto the coffee table. He glanced over at the gym equipment in the corner, noticing it had been moved since the previous night. All the weights had been set to maximum, which even Taika would have trouble with.

Taika had taken the laptop and phone out and was setting them up when Jason walked over. Taika looked around but no longer saw the sword.

"I knew I was right about the secret kung fu. That was a sweet looking kata."

"It's more of a meditative sword dance," Jason said.

Taika gave him an assessing look, glancing at the door.

"I didn't see your car outside."

"It'll be there if I need it."

"You're a mysterious guy, bro."

"No, I just fake it for the ladies," Jason said, flashing a grin.

Taika laughed as he handed Jason the phone.

"I put my number in the contacts, along with your uncle and current numbers for your parents, your sister and your brother-in-law."

"Not my brother, or my sister-in-law?"

"Mr Asano said that might be touchy."

"It's fine," Jason said. "Put them in."

"No worries," Taika said. He took back the phone and programmed in two more numbers from a piece of paper.

"All done," Taika said. "Mr Asano never did say what the issue was exactly," Taika said leadingly.

"I used to be in a relationship with my now sister-in-law, before she married my brother," Jason said.

"Your brother married your ex? That's not cool. How longer after you were with her did they get together?"

"During."

"Oh, damn. That sucks, bro."

"Agreed."

“So is there anything you want to do today?” Taika asked. “I’ve set up an appointment with a lawyer this afternoon so you can sort out the legal stuff about you not being dead anymore. Mr Asano wants to have dinner with you, and you can talk about what you asked him for then.”

“Thanks,” Jason said. “I think I’ll spend the day on the internet, catching up on what I missed.”

“You’ve been away for a year and a half, yeah?” Taika asked.

“Yep. No TV, no movies, no internet. Not even a radio.”

“Damn. You missed the last season of Game of Thrones.”

“Was it any good?”

“It was real good. Extending it to thirteen episodes so they could properly develop the climax was a smart move, after how much they’d been rushing things.”

“Last I heard, they were cutting it down to six episodes.”

“Someone leaked the scripts and the internet went crazy. They rewrote the whole thing and everyone really liked how it turned out.”

“Nice.”

“Okay. I’m going to go. You need anything, give me a call. Otherwise, I’ll pick you up for lunch before I take you to see the lawyer, yeah?”

“Sounds good,” Jason said.

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Taika called Hiro, neither aware of the shadowy creature hiding a body in each of their shadows.

“Are you getting Jason settled?” Hiro asked.

“No worries, Boss. Well, maybe some worries.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Your nephew’s weird.”

“He’s certainly different to what I remember. You think there’s a problem?”

“It’s just a lot of little things. He disappeared, yeah, and now he’s back and all mysterious and stuff? What if he’s EOA?”

“Clearly he’s been through something,” Hiro said. “It’s a big leap from there to the EOA, though.”

“We know they’ve been sniffing around,” Taika said. “You saw how jumpy it’s made Growl. What if your nephew is their foot in the door?”

“That wouldn’t be their style. They’re known to be domineering. What makes you think Jason is EOA?”

“When I checked on him this morning, I saw someone had put all the weights up to maximum. You nephew isn’t exactly a huge bloke.”

“You think he’s one of the EOA’s juiced-up thugs?”

“I like your nephew, Boss, but he feels dangerous.”

“He’s not one of their juicers,” Hiro said. “That drug cocktail they put them on messes up their heads.”

“Like brain damage?” Taika asked.

“Exactly like that. Did Jason seem brain damaged to you?”

“No, Boss; he seems pretty sharp. I can’t help but feel like he seems dangerous, though.”

“I thought the same thing. Keep an eye out, but make sure nothing happens to him. If the EOA do get it in their heads to make use of him, it’ll be by grabbing him, not recruiting him.”

“No worries, boss.”

\*\*\*

The abandoned hospital’s helipad was still serviceable and Annabeth Tilden’s helicopter landed mid morning. She was dressed in a sensible suit, as was the woman waiting for her with a powerful torch in hand. They looked like government functionaries, which was exactly the intention.

Annabeth didn’t bother asking questions over the noise of the winding down helicopter, instead letting Ketevan lead her inside, guiding the way by torchlight. They went downstairs and set off down a corridor.

“What do you have, Keti?” Annabeth asked. “I’ve got the Engineers of Ascension pushing into Sydney that I have to keep an eye on, now the Children’s Hospital miracle debacle and whatever this thing here is.”

“The hospital miracle thing is ours?”

“A hospital full of kids were mysteriously cured by an angel made of stars, Keti. It would be weirder if magic wasn’t responsible.”

“That really happened?”

“Yeah. The media doesn’t even need to sensationalise. Not that they aren’t trying, bless them. Whoever’s responsible clearly doesn’t give a crap about the mess they’re making, but that’s Aram’s mess to sort through. What do you have for me here?”

“It definitely wasn’t a glitch in the grid,” Ketevan said. “The magic event is over, but it was so powerful that we can still read the residual magic like it just happened. After our investigators picked up on it, I sent in an after-action team to see what we could learn.”

“And?”

“Well, you remember that I told you the event was localised?”

“No. You woke me up in the middle of the night.”

“Sorry, Ma’am. Well, it turned out to be very, very localised.”

Ketevan turned off the torch when they reached the maternity ward, where a number of lamps had been set up to illuminate the area. The after-action team looked like a forensics team as they bustled about. In the maternity theatre, a flat board had been set out and a magical diagram drawn onto it. Floating above the circle was a horizontal figure that looked to be made of fire.

“What am I looking at?” Annabeth asked.

“As best we can tell,” Ketevan said, “this is the echo of a variant incursion event.”

“That’s a rather extreme variant,” Annabeth said.

“Yes,” Ketevan agreed. “I told you about the rated strength, which still registers above five in every test we run. The proto-astral space existed for less than a second, which is quite a lot less than the usual forty-three hours. And, of course, instead of covering kilometres, it was the size and shape of a person.”

“You’re suggesting a person came through,” Annabeth said.

“Or something person-shaped,” Ketevan said. “Maybe it was an angel made of stars.”



## Chapter 272

### Not the Regular Sort of Dangerous

“How’d it go?” Taika asked as he drove Jason through the city. They were in one of the cars Hiro kept in a pool for his staff, a luxurious town car Taika had picked for the roomy interior.

“There are some hoops to jump through in legally coming back from the dead,” Jason said. “That lawyer you set me up with seems to know his business.”

“Yeah, he’s good,” Taika said. “We’ve got some time before you meet your uncle for dinner. Is there anything you wanted to do?”

“I don’t suppose you know where I could get some powdered silver?”

“I know a guy.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, bro. No worries.”

“You’re not going to ask what it’s for?”

“A job like mine,” Taika said, “you learn when to ask questions and when not to.”

“You seem like a really good employee,” Jason said.

“That’s why your uncle pays me the big bucks.”

\*\*\*

For each of his shadow bodies subsumed into Jason, Shade could mask his summoner from one form of sensory perception. He could muffle Jason’s sound, mask his scent and even eliminate the heat radiated by his body. The only senses Shade could not mask were aura senses and direct looking at him.

While Shade couldn’t prevent direct observation, observation through a secondary medium was another matter entirely. How effective the obfuscation was depended on the medium in question. A magical telescope, for example was something that Shade could hide Jason from entirely, as if he were invisible. Non magical means, such as an ordinary telescope, Shade couldn’t block at all.

Electronic devices, like cameras, proved to be something of a middle ground. Shade could not totally remove Jason from their detection, due to the lack of magic to interfere with, but he could still interfere with the complex process of data translation involved in electronic devices. The result was Jason appearing as little more than a blur to someone watching the feed. In shadowy conditions that Jason’s magic cloak could make the most of, it was the next best thing to true invisibility.

This was not Shade's first time in a technologically advanced world and he had a solid grasp of his limitations, which he and Jason had discussed at length. One advantage Shade offered was an uncanny sense of when they were being observed. Jason's aura senses could do this for living observers, but Shade could sense any camera systems pointed in their direction.

Jason was uncertain if his personal immunity to tracking powers extended to his phone, so he decided to take precautions. After obtaining some powdered silver with surprising ease, along with a few other relatively ordinary materials, he had Taika leave him back at the townhouse until it was time for Jason to meet his uncle.

Shade had ascertained that there were no cameras, other than the one in his phone, the webcam in his new laptop and the one on the desktop computer upstairs. Jason left them all upstairs on the mezzanine while he worked on his new phone case downstairs.

Clearing a space on the polished hardwood floor, Jason made preparations for the first of several rituals. First, he took out the mana lamps he had left to charge the night before. He would need them to temporarily upgrade the anaemic ambient magic to perform even the most basic rituals.

The same lack of magic made the lamps very slow to accumulate charge, however, so he would need to work with haste. He was going to miss Clive, with his quick-fire ritual drawing and power to balance out ambient magic. He didn't activate the lamps immediately, wanting to be as ready as he could so as to not waste their limited uptime.

The ritual Jason wanted to perform required magically-charged silver powder. Since he couldn't source it locally, he would need to take some ordinary powdered silver and add the magic himself. It was the kind of peripheral skill he hadn't picked up from his skill book knowledge. It was Farrah and later Clive pushing him into expanding his knowledge base that prepared him for these circumstances.

That was not to say that skill books didn't have their place. His skill book-derived knowledge of artifice would let him craft a very simple magical item using the magically-charged silver.

He started by using the engraving pen he had just purchased to carve a magical diagram onto the back of his new phone case. He had practised with it first, quickly becoming comfortable with its use. The superhuman coordination of his speed attribute and the accelerated learning speed of his spirit attribute allowed him to swiftly become comfortable with simple physical tasks.

His hand moved with confidence as he engraved the phone case. One of the advantages of skill book knowledge was that it was imprinted like a computer file, so he

could easily engrave the magical diagram from memory. Like most protection-type diagrams, it was an elaborately embellished pentagram, which made for a visually pleasing design.

He set out the other things he would need. Chalk, a bag of powdered lesser monster cores and some iron spirit coins. He wondered if there was a way to charge the lamps faster with spirit coins, which was something he would need to look at later.

Jason drew out a ritual circle on the hardwood floor with chalk, then activated the mana lamps. He used powdered monster cores to adjust to the ambient magic, which was an easy task given the magically inert conditions. It wasn't something he'd done a lot, normally relying on Clive's power to render the step unnecessary.

"Next time I get killed and sent to another universe, I'm taking Clive with me."

Jason's thoughts drifted to the other soul who had apparently arrived with him. If it really was an outworlder, Jason still had no idea how to track them down. Searching for a mysterious, naked, bald person with magic powers on the internet had brought up an unhelpful plethora of results.

Setting the mana lamps to raise the ambient magic to just the minimum level for iron-rank rituals would still only give Jason a few minutes. In that time he needed to charge the silver powder with magic using one ritual, rebalance the ambient magic with a quick second ritual, then use the magically charged silver in a third ritual. He activated the mana lamps, getting results in just a few seconds.

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➤ You have entered a region of normalised magic. Your recovery rates will remain at normal levels without spirit coin consumption.

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Despite the time constraint, he didn't hurry. He knew that taking the time to do it right would get better results than rushing the job.

"Slow is smooth, smooth is fast," he muttered to himself as he worked with careful deliberation.

He successfully charged the silver with magic from the spirit coins. He used a simple cleansing ritual to purge the residual magic from that first task, then performed a third ritual as the last step. His hands moved over the ritual circle like an orchestra conductor as he chanted out the ritual. When he uttered the final syllable, the magically-charged silver power became a liquid and crawled onto the phone case in the middle of the ritual circle. The liquid flowed into the engraved diagram and instantly turned solid, leaving a silver diagram set into the black case.

"I think it looks good," Jason said, picking it up and turning it over in his hand.

“It is aesthetically satisfactory,” Shade agreed.

“Of course you think so,” Jason said. “It’s mostly black.”

“If you are unhappy with my design choices, I can make some modifications to the vehicle shapes I take,” Shade said. “Gordon was watching something called ‘The Love Bug,’ on television this morning. I could probably do something like that.”

“Uh, no,” Jason said. “Consider my criticism withdrawn with apologies.”

Jason turned off the mana lamps.

- 
- You have entered a region of magical desolation. The levels of magical density and magical saturation are extremely low, insufficient to produce spontaneous magical manifestations.
- 

He returned the mana lamps to various places around the townhouse, as separate as he could make them. The further apart they were, the less they would fight over what little magic there was as they charged.

Jason then took his new case and picked up his phone.

“I have no idea if this will work,” Jason said.

“It should be sufficient to prevent non-magical tracking, along with most iron-rank tracking effects,” Shade said. “Anything more powerful will be a large enough effect to be caught up in your personal immunity.”

“Magical tracking,” Jason said. “Am I reading too much into what uncle Hiro said about the federal police covering up my disappearance when I left this world?”

“It is best to gather more information,” Shade said. “If your world is less ignorant of magic than you initially believed, your actions at the hospital will draw out those who know.”

“Any nibbles, yet?”

“I have not seen anyone with auras above normal rank amongst the investigators, but there are some amongst them who seem out of place compared to the others. I am continuing to look into it.”

“Should we have left more of your bodies at the hospital?”

“Two more would be useful. I will only be able to take the form of a motorcycle instead of a car with fewer bodies on hand, however.”

“That’s fine. Send the bodies over now.”

Two shadow figures slipped out of Jason’s shadow and quickly vanished. Jason retrieved his phone and placed it in his newly enhanced phone case. A few seconds later it rang.

“G’day Uncle Hiro.”

“Hi, Jason. Did you do something to your phone?”

Jason chuckled.

“Were you tracking it? I just installed some security, thanks for helping me test it.”

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Jason made his way to the apartment building next to his town house, where Hiro’s penthouse apartment turned out to occupy the entirety of the top floor. It was large, open and modern in design, with lots of white, cool grey and metal. Jason drooled over the kitchen where a personal chef was working on their dinner.

“You had a haircut,” Hiro said.

“It got a bit out of control in the process of coming back,” Jason said.

“But you’re letting the beard grow in?”

Jason rubbed the stubble on his chin.

“I started wearing one while I was away.”

“Do you go all bushy, or more of a sculpted, archvillain look?”

“Villain all the way,” Jason said.

Hiro led Jason to the entertainment lounge. Showing off the bar, Hiro drank Tasmanian whisky while Jason eyed-off the white chocolate liqueur. He made himself a cocktail that was milky, smooth and sweet.

“So, I’ve been looking into moving this gold bar of yours,” Hiro said as they sat.

“There is someone who can take it off your hands, but he wants to meet you in person.”

“You don’t think I should.”

“I don’t,” Hiro confirmed. “Jason, I operate on the periphery of legality. I’m useful to the people I answer to, at least in part, because I stay more or less clean. This guy I’m talking about is not clean. He’s serious. Dangerous. If you need money, I can help you out.”

“I appreciate that, Uncle. I’d like to go through with it, though.”

“Alright,” Hiro said, not trying to argue further. “We’ll go after dinner.”

“Thank you. There’s something I’d like you to ask you about, Uncle.”

“Oh?”

“What can you tell me about the EOA?”

Hiro frowned.

“Where did you hear about the EOA?”

“I’ve been getting the lay of the land. I heard about them, and something about drugged-up thugs. That’s all I know, though.”

“They’re a gang. Or an organised crime outfit. There are a lot of stories, but not a lot of hard information. Word is that they have international backing, although from who I have no idea. They started taking things over in Perth, maybe two years ago. Melbourne a year after that. Now, they’re eyeing us off here, in Sydney.”

“They just move in and take over?”

“Word is that they’re strange. Dangerous, and not the regular sort of dangerous. They have some kind of drug regimen they use to turn their muscle into ’roid freaks.”

Hiro was watching Jason carefully as he gave his explanation.

“I’m not one of them, Uncle.”

“Would you tell me if you were?”

“I have no idea. I genuinely only heard of them for the first time today. What does EOA stand for?”

“No idea,” Hiro said. “You are into something, though, aren’t you? Coming back from the dead with a walk full of swagger and pockets full of gold. Sleek sports cars and anti-tracking software. It’s all very James Bond.”

“I might tell you about it, someday,” Jason said.

“Is someone going to come looking for that gold bar?”

“It’s not just one bar,” Jason said. “And, no. I obtained the gold quite legally. I just didn’t bring it into the country legally.”

“Why not?”

“I couldn’t explain where it came from, I never left the country legally in the first place and I was dead.”

“Fair enough,” Hiro chuckled. “How many of those bars do you have?”

“More than your dangerous associate can handle. I’ll have to find a way to legitimise it if I’m going to get any use out of it.”

“I don’t know anything about gold regulation,” Hiro said. “I know some good lawyers, so I’ll see if they know someone who works in that field.”

“Thank you, although I don’t anticipate it being a simple process.”

“How much gold do you have, if you don’t mind me asking.”

“The bar I handed to you,” Jason said, “plus thirty nine just like it.”

Hiro took in a sharp breath of air.

“You have four hundred kilos of gold? That’s a market price of...”

“More than thirty million,” Jason said. “It’ll have to be a very good lawyer.”

“No kidding. The lawyer I sent you to today was adequate?”

“He was great,” Jason said. “My legal status should be cleaned up without too much fuss.”

“Any more thoughts on when you’ll let the rest of the family know you’re back?”

“It’s Erika’s birthday next Friday,” Jason said. “I thought I might start by seeing her then, and go from there.”

“A birthday present she’ll really appreciate,” Hiro said. “She wasn’t happy with the investigation into your death. She didn’t let it go for a long time, and was never truly satisfied.”

“She’s always been good to me,” Jason said. “Do you know what happened with her TV show when she moved home?”

“She has a new one now. Beachside Kitchen with Erika Asano. She films outdoors, on the boardwalk right by the Surf Club. Big audience, cooks huge batches of food to give out.”

“I hope she wasn’t meant to be filming yesterday. It was really coming down when I got back.”

“She takes winter off. They asked her to be a judge on one of those cooking shows where they vote people off, but she turned them down.”

Jason chuckled.

“She hates those shows.”

## Chapter 273

### Boogie Man

Taika was driving Hiro's large town car, with Hiro and Jason in the back.

"The advantage of being on the legitimate side of the business is that I can be more conspicuous about enjoying the fruits of my labour," Hiro said. "The man we're going to see doesn't live in a penthouse apartment, but don't think that means he's not influential and powerful. Especially don't make the mistake of thinking he isn't dangerous."

"I'm familiar with the ramifications of crossing powerful criminals," Jason said.

"Oh?"

"I received an unfortunate lesson," Jason said, not explaining further.

"You seem fairly comfortable with my criminal entanglements," Hiro said. "Your grandmother would be disappointed in you."

"It wouldn't exactly be out of her way," Jason said. "She always liked Kaito better."

"The same with me and Shiro," Hiro said. "He was the favourite, I was the disappointment and your father laid low in the middle. Ken didn't really grab attention until he married a white girl so young. Everyone was expecting an explosion, only to be startled at how well your mother and mine got along. No one was expecting that."

"They both wanted diligent little Japanese children," Jason said. "They got Kaito, so they were willing to put up with me."

"They care more about you than you think, Jason."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. They had many regrets after you were gone. They even softened their stance on me. Not a lot, but they'll at least talk to me. They still won't be happy to know you and I are spending time together. I never would have expected you to become entangled in this kind of life."

"Oh, I only touched on criminal affairs peripherally in the course of my other work."

"Well, don't go underestimating the man we're about to meet. His name is Ari, and while he might live in a poor suburb, he is anything but. I didn't want to involve you directly, but he insisted on meeting you first. Since he did, he must have tested the gold and found it to be what you said it was."

"You left it with him? That's more than eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of gold."

"Australian market price," Hiro qualified. "You aren't going to a gold seller in the shopping centre, Jason."



“I’m aware.”

“Honestly, the fact that it is so much money is what stops him from just taking it. I suspect he wants to meet you to feel out what kind of backing you have. If he thinks you’re weak, he’ll try and rip you off and push to see if you’ve got more. Don’t show any weakness and don’t let him shake you.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that, Uncle Hiro.”

The expensive car looked increasingly out of place as it drove through the Western Suburbs, pulling up in front of a house obscured by large bushes rising over a high wooden fence with flaking white paint. The street was dark, the street lights somewhat dimmer than normal.

“Ari likes to let his dogs intimidate people as they come in,” Hiro warned.

Jason concentrated his aura senses, feeling nine people in the house and four dogs in the yard. He sent small, directed aura pulses at the dogs, letting them feel the strength and inherently domineering nature of it.

Taika open the gate in the fence, allowing Hiro and Jason to go through. A concrete path ran up the front yard to the door, with an overgrown lawn on one side and a chain-link enclosure on the other. Inside the enclosure was a concrete floor and long, aluminium kennel, padded heavily with old blankets. In contrast to the disregard clearly held for lawn maintenance, the enclosure and the kennel within was clean and cared for. Taika and Hiro looked warily at the four German Shepherds hunched submissively on the floor of the enclosure in a line.

“What’s up with the dogs?” Taika asked.

“I don’t know,” Hiro said with worry in his voice. “Every other time I was here they tried to claw their way through the fence to get at me.”

“Maybe they’ve gone through obedience training,” Jason said.

“Dogs have sharp instincts,” Taika said, glancing at Jason. “Something’s got them spooked.”

“I guess we go knock?” Hiro suggested. “Normally dogs barking is the doorbell.”

They went up to the door, Taika stepping forward to knock. A man opened it up, looking past them with a confused expression at the dog enclosure. Jason noticed the man was wearing socks but no shoes. Taika gave him a greeting nod.

“G’day, Petros.”

“Hello Taika,” Petros responded. He was a big man, although didn’t look so in front of the mountainous Taika. He spoke softly, with a slight Armenian accent. He turned to Hiro.

“Mr Asano,” he greeted. “This is your nephew?”

“This is Jason, yes.”

“The boss said to bring you in as soon as you arrived,” Petros said, moving deeper into the house. Hiro motioned to Jason and followed, with Taika bringing up the rear.

The exterior of the house was in desperate need of paint, which fit right in with the neighbourhood. The interior was like a different world, having clearly been gutted and rebuilt from the frame out. Past the door was a tiled entryway, where shoes were lined up on racks.

“Shoes off, please.”

Jason took his shoes off along with Taika and Hiro. He slipped them into his inventory instead of onto the racks, using Taika’s bulk to hide the action. Petros then led them deeper into the house, at which point the purpose of removing their shoes became clear. The tiled foyer gave way to a hallway with rich carpeting that would be easy to dirty and hard to clean. The walls were wood panelled, with soft sconce lighting to provide a warm environment.

Petros led them into a room large enough to occupy the bulk of the house, where Jason could see into kitchen and dining rooms, plus doors that presumably led into bedrooms. The room was a large lounge area, with a giant television, bar and multiple, luxurious couches and chairs. In the centre of the room was a large table with a sunken area with a felt surface set into it. The table cellar had an elaborate board game laid out on it, with four people sitting around playing.

Jason even recognised the game, due to an old friend from school named Greg. He had regularly roped Jason and Amy into board games that would last upwards of three, six and even eight hours. He absently wondered where Greg was now; the last he heard, Greg was studying law.

Four more men were playing a video game on the large television. Everyone in the room was a burly man, except for one of the people at the table. He was slightly older, with less of an obvious-henchman air about him. Jason picked him out as Ari.

“Hey boss,” Petros said. “Mr Asano is here.”

Jason had guessed right as the man turned to give the entrants an assessing gaze, before getting up. He was lean, around forty five, with thinning hair. He was wearing neat, comfortable pants and a simple shirt.

“Ari,” Hiro greeted neutrally.

“Hiro,” Ari said in turn, then glanced back at Petros.

“The dogs?” he asked.

“They looked scared, boss,” Petros said. “Like when Vermillion comes.”

Jason felt every aura in the room except for Ari and his own tremble on hearing the name Vermillion. Even the stalwart Taika radiated trepidation.

“Is that so?” Ari mused. Unlike Petros, there was no trace of accent, although Jason knew from Hiro that he was an old school Armenian gangster. Ari turned his gaze back to the visitors.

“My dogs aren’t scared of a lot,” he said. “They’re definitely not scared of you, Hiro. They probably should be scared of you, Taika, but they’re not.”

His gaze settled on Jason.

“There’s only one person that scares my dogs; a man I do business with from time to time. When he comes here, you don’t hear a peep out of them. They’re trained guard dogs, and trained well, but they will have no part of this man.”

“Animals have good instincts,” Jason said. Ari’s gaze remained on him and he met it with casual relaxation.

“They do,” Ari agreed. “But the thing is, this man does not just scare my dogs. He scares my people and he scares me. I feel no shame in admitting it. This man, Vermillion, is the boogie man. Isn’t that right, Hiro?”

“It is,” Hiro said. He was clearly unhappy at the turn the conversation was taking but Ari paid it no mind, keeping his gaze locked on Jason.

“Now my dogs are scared,” Ari continued, “but this man isn’t here. You are. Are you a boogie man too, Jason Asano?”

“Yes,” Jason said softly.

Ari grinned, letting out a chuckle as he turned away.

“I didn’t know what to make of it,” he said. “Hiro calls me up and says he wants to move some gold. Obviously, I want to do my due diligence and what do I find but Hiro’s dead nephew, mysteriously returned to life and wandering about with a giant gold bar. You understand why this raises a lot of questions.”

“I do,” Jason said. “but since I’m here, I’m assuming you had the gold assayed and were satisfied.”

“I did. You’re certain no one is going to come looking for it?”

“Yes. Where I got it from, it wasn’t valued very highly. That’s how I picked up so much for a relatively small cost.”

“You have more?” Ari asked.

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“Enough that I’m not willing to pull it out until I get a better deal and a good money launderer.”

Ari laughed.

“The thing about this man who scares my dogs,” Ari said, veering the conversation back to the previous topic, “is that it isn’t just my dogs that get scared. I told you this, but I don’t think you understand. This man is a predator. You can feel it in your bones, like something crawling under your skin. Being near this man is like being a mouse under the gaze of an owl.”

He once again turned to focus on Jason.

“My dogs might be scared, but is it really of you?”

Ari stepped right into Jason’s personal space, staring him in the eye.

“You don’t scare me, Jason Asano.”

Jason gave Ari a slight smile.

“Would you like me to?”

Ari took a step back and started laughing.

“Would you like me to?” he repeated back, still laughing. “You know, Hiro, you said your nephew wasn’t in the game. He’s into something, though, yes? He’s got the stuff.”

“He doesn’t like to talk about his time away,” Hiro said.

“But I do want to talk about it,” Ari said. “Are you EOA, Jason Asano?”

“If I told you no, would you believe me?” Jason asked.

“If I asked you hard enough, I’d be confident you were telling the truth,” Ari said.

“I’m hoping it doesn’t come to that,” Jason said.

“Then you will need to answer my questions,” Ari said, his mirth dropping like a mask to reveal naked threat. “You’ll need to assuage my curiosity.”

“Ari,” Hiro said. “This isn’t what we agreed.”

“We’ve got EOA pushing in and your boy turning up, all but waving a banner that reads ‘very suspicious man.’ Mr Tollman told me personally to get some answers, Hiro.”

Hiro blanched.

“I’m sorry, Jason,” Hiro said. “I know you don’t want to talk about it, but you need to answer Ari’s questions.”

There was a shift in the room. No one moved but everyone felt it as Jason slowly unleashed his aura. Normal humans couldn’t detect aura, unless it was projected in a specific way. It was a simple use of basic projection control, one of the first things Farrah had taught to him. It was a tool that essences user used to intimidate normals, which, is exactly what Jason was doing.

With the progression of his aura manipulation skills, Jason could expertly express his aura slowly and deliberately, allowing the same domineering force that intimidated the dogs to press down on the normal rank auras the men in the room didn't realise they even possessed. Only Taika and his uncle were exempted, but they couldn't miss the growing dread shown on the faces around them.

"Is this what you were talking about when you said that man scared you?" Jason asked. He spoke quietly but his words reverberated with his aura, feeling like a shout to the beleaguered criminals. He was the smallest person in the room, yet he felt larger than Taika. Everyone in the room was transfixed by Jason's suddenly tyrannical presence.

Jason stepped into Ari's space, the way Ari had to him. His aura settled on Ari's soul like a knife at his throat.

"Is this how your boogie man makes you feel, Ari? Do you still have any questions for me?"

Ari wordlessly shook his head.

"That's what I thought. You can give my uncle the money for the gold; I'll see myself out."

Jason turned to his uncle.

"You'll probably want to chat with Ari once I'm gone," Jason said. "I'll make my own way back. Taika can give me the money later."

"You don't have a car," Hiro said.

"I'll make do," Jason said. "I'm sorry for this, Uncle. I've caused you trouble."

Jason walked out. Hiro nodded at Taika to follow but Jason was already closing the door behind him. When Taika opened it, Jason was nowhere to be seen.

## Chapter 274

### More Plausible Than the Reality

Hiro returned home to the apartment building he owned. His penthouse floor was only accessible by his private elevator or through the regular elevator by using an access key. He walked straight to the bar and poured himself a stiff drink. It had been a strange night.

The entertainment lounge had one wall made up of windows looking out onto the balcony. Just as he was about to sit, Hiro spotted a silhouette out there, easy to miss on a moonless night. His first thought was to shout for Taika but he recognised Jason's figure, leaning on the railing as he looked out over the city. Hiro opened the sliding door and stepped outside.

"How did you get up here?" Hiro asked.

"You've been nothing but generous, Uncle Hiro," Jason said, neither answering the question nor turning around. "All I've brought you in return is trouble."

Hiro stepped up next to Jason at the railing, resting his drink on it.

"You're family, Jason. All you ever have to do is ask."

Jason turned giving his uncle a smile.

"I admire you for feeling that way after the way the family has treated you. I was less magnanimous, with less reason to be."

"Your brother stole the girl you loved since you were ten years old, Jason. That's seriously not okay."

"I know, right?" Jason said. "It's nice to have someone actually say it. My own mother more or less told me to suck it up and be happy for them."

"Seriously? I'm going to be honest, Jason; I never liked your mother."

"Really?" Jason asked with a chuckle. "You always hid it so well."

"I swear that the only reason she kept the baby was your father being Japanese."

"Don't you dare say yellow fever," Jason said.

"I'm not that crass," Hiro said. "I'm pretty sure she was entranced by the idea of an adorable Japanese baby, though."

"In her defence, Erika was very adorable," Jason said. "I've seen the pictures."

"She really was," Hiro agreed with a reminiscent smile.

"How did things go after I left you with those hoodlums?" Jason asked.

"Hoodlums?" Hiro asked. "Jason, we don't carry money out of banks in a big sack with a dollar sign on it."

“How am I meant to know that?” Jason asked. “If I was a criminal mastermind, I wouldn’t need your help.”

“Taika has your money,” Hiro said. “Full market price.”

“Why?” Jason asked. “That’s highly suspect.”

“After you left, Ari called our boss. He told Ari what to pay you, but he also wants to meet you. You should know that the man we talked about, Vermillion, will probably be there.”

“He works for your boss?”

“Definitely not,” Hiro said. “I’m not sure who Vermillion works for exactly, but my boss is very careful about how he treats them and their secrets. All I know is that there’s some kind of group that has no interest in criminal enterprises themselves, only maintaining some useful contacts. I don’t know if they’re government spooks or a bunch of shady rich people who occasionally need some dirty work done. They’re way above the likes of my boss, though, let alone me. Vermillion is someone from that group the boss calls on for favours, from time to time. He scares my boss as much as everyone else.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “I don’t want to cause you more trouble than I have, so set up a meeting with your boss. In the meantime, I’ve brought a lot of strangeness to your door. I know you must have questions.”

“I thought you came to me because you knew I wouldn’t push.”

“And you haven’t, which I appreciate. But fair is fair, Uncle, and you deserve some answers. That said, there are things I think it’s better you don’t know. Some secrets open doors that can’t be closed again.”

“Jason, you’re being very clandestine. Faking your own death, the self-driving car, the secrets practically dripping off of you.”

“The James Bond thing again?”

“The James Bond thing,” Hiro said. “Did you go off and join ASUS or something?”

“Nothing so safe,” Jason said lightly. “As you said, there’s a very big secret hanging over me and I’m starting to suspect that there are powerful people invested in keeping it.”

“This organisation that Vermillion belongs to?”

“Maybe,” Jason said. “More likely, they’re only part of a wider circle. I don’t know who these people are or what they would do if they found out you knew the things I’ve been keeping from you. But if you’re willing to take the risk, I’m willing to tell you everything. To answer all your questions.”

He let out a frustrated sigh.

“You’ve been unreserved in helping me,” Jason continued. “I fear that all I’ve done in return is bring danger to your door. If you get involved in my affairs, you’ll have no more protection than what I can personally offer. Ignorance is an uncomfortable shield, but it may be the best one you have.”

“Alright,” Hiro said. His curiosity was enough to strongly war against his prudence. “How about I ask you some questions and you tell me when we’re nudging into dangerous territory?”

“That works,” Jason said. “I know you must have some pressing questions. Things haven’t quite seemed rational since I showed up, have they?”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Hiro said. “Things have been getting strange for a while now. We’ve all felt it, like something in the air. This EOA group with their juiced-up thugs. The army running around with their terrorist readiness exercises that are so transparently a cover up for something. This guy Vermillion and whoever’s behind him. There’s a game I can’t see and the rules are changing. Then you show up and you seem to understand what the new rules are.”

Hiro flashed Jason a self-deprecating grin. “This probably sounds like nonsense to you.”

“No,” Jason said. “I know exactly what you’re talking about. It just worries me that this was happening before I ever left and I didn’t know. I need answers, but for now, you were promised yours.”

Hiro rubbed a hand over his face, unsure of where to start. With Vermillion, he felt like he had brushed up against a dangerous truth long before Jason returned. He couldn’t help but think of the similarities Ari saw between the mysterious man and Hiro’s now mysterious nephew. Ari certainly seemed to be scared of Jason in the same way, if not more. Unlike Vermillion, however, Jason had not scared Hiro himself or Taika. He had also not unleashed that strange effect until he needed it. In the presence of Vermillion, by contrast, Hiro felt like a prey under the gaze of a predator every moment in his presence.

“Did you really make Ari’s dogs go submissive like that?” Hiro asked.

“Yes,” Jason answered.

“And the thing you did that scared Ari and his guys. That was the same thing?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think it’s the same thing Vermillion does?” Hiro asked.

“I can’t be certain,” Jason said. “It’s highly likely, though.”

“And what is that thing?”

Jason gave his uncle an awkward smile.



“This is where we head into dangerous territory, Uncle. I’ll try and explain enough to give some understanding, but I’m going to start out very vague. If you want more details, you can have them. But be certain before you ask for them.”

“How dangerous is this secret you’re not telling me, Jason?”

“I honestly don’t know. I have no idea about the local situation, which I’m hoping this Vermillion character can help me to rectify.”

Jason took in a cleansing breath of winter night air, only to find it not so cleansing. The city was far from what he was used to, be it the rich, pleasant scents of the astral space jungle, or the waters of Greenstone. Whether the waters of the delta or the ocean, the magic carried down the Mistrun River left even bog water smelling oddly fresh and clean.

Making things worse was Jason’s enhanced senses of smell and taste. Taking a deep breath of city air was like coating his tongue in old motor oil.

“You alright Jason?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Where I’ve been, it’s hard to get in or out. There’s no internet, phone, television, radio. No communication of any kind. My chance to leave came unexpectedly and I don’t know how things ended up after I was gone. They might think I’m dead.”

“Why would they think that?”

“Because I died.”

“What?”

“Let’s put that aside for the moment,” Jason said.

“Put it aside? You just told me that you died!”

“I got better, obviously. Uncle, it might be best if I try and give you some kind of overview. While I was away – in fact, the reason I left – was that I became part of... lets call it a community. I never realised it existed here, and in secret, until I joined it myself, over there. I haven’t even confirmed that it’s here, but what you just told me seems to.”

“Well, if you’re going to brush off the whole faking your death thing, I want to go back to what you did to Ari’s dogs. And to Ari. Is it like pheromones or something? Did the CIA MK-Ultra you with designer drugs until your body odour triggers a fear response?”

“That sounds more plausible than the reality,” Jason said with a chuckle. “But no; it’s something else. As for what, that would be crossing the informational Rubicon. If you want to know...”

“No,” Hiro said firmly. “One of the reasons I’ve been successful doing what I do is knowing when not to go deeper. And these waters are getting very deep.”

“That’s wise,” Jason said with relief. “I hope. It could be that I’ve already implicated you, just by coming back. The whole family, in fact. There’s a chance that some will see my return as a threat, an opportunity, or both. Those with poor intentions and few scruples may try pulling you in as leverage.”

“You worry that not telling us what you’re involved in might get us blindsided?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “Ultimately, though, knowing won’t help you. You aren’t equipped for what’s out there and I can’t get you ready in any kind of practical time-frame. All I can do is protect you if someone comes after you.”

“I have Taika and Growl,” Hiro said. “Taika isn’t just big. He’s smart and observant.”

“So I noticed,” Jason said. “He’s not enough, though. Not even close.”

“So, what are you doing about it?” Hiro asked.

“I’ve made a move already, to try and draw people out. For the moment, I’m keeping an eye on you. If trouble comes while I’m in the city, I’ll know and be there faster than you can imagine.”

“Are you having me watched?”

“Yes.”

“They must be good,” Hiro said. “My security hasn’t caught so much as a whiff of them.”

Jason chuckled again.

“And they won’t. Suffice to say that I’ll be informed immediately if anything outside of your security’s purview comes along. I’ve already done something eye-catching that should draw out some of the players to where I can get a look at them. That will hopefully give me some inroads to what is happening here.”

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Annabeth walked into the conference room where an investigation team was waiting to update her. It was a six person team, specifically put together to investigate the children’s hospital event in Sydney. Also present was Ketevan, who was leading the other hospital investigation, up the coast. Annabeth took the position at the head of the table.

The lead investigator of the Sydney incident was a rugged-looking man named Aram, with a bushy beard and a large frame. He looked like he would be more at home in faded overalls than a suit and tie. Like those of the other people in the room, Aram’s outfit was a suit of mid-range quality, designed to evoke the feel of a faceless government agent.

In Aram’s case it didn’t work well, but despite his appearance, he was a consummate professional. After making sure everyone was on the same page with the basics of the investigation, he started detailing their progress to Annabeth.

“We’ve looked into the families and other connections of the people in the hospital,” he explained. “There were a couple of hits, but we looked into them and ruled them out as potential instigators of the event.”

“But that is only our Network personnel, right?” Annabeth asked.

“That’s correct,” he confirmed. “That’s allowed us to rule out any of our people, but we don’t have membership rosters for the Engineers of Ascension. As for the Cabal and the smaller collectives, there’s no telling.”

“But you are looking into that, yes?” Annabeth prompted.

“Yes, Ma’am. We’ve made it very clear that we will be finding the responsible parties and the other groups seem to be cooperating. A lot of them don’t like it, but they know that this kind of overt action crosses our bottom line. None of them want us coming down on their heads.”

“What’s your take on their responses?” Annabeth asked him.

“My instincts are telling me that this isn’t coming from an established group. They may be capitulating, but they aren’t hiding their displeasure at our heavy-handedness. No one’s stepping on eggshells. That’s not to say we aren’t continuing to be thorough. My instincts have been wrong before.”

“Good,” Annabeth approved, glancing at Ketevan, before turning her gaze back to Aram. “You think this is related to the other incident?”

“I’d say more likely than not, at this stage,” Aram said. “The timing suggests it’s not a coincidence, although everything is still on the table until proven otherwise.”

“Ketevan does have one theory,” Aram said. “Keti, if you would?”

Ketevan nodded.

“I had this idea about the event in the hospital,” she said. “I’ve been looking into it, but we have limited information. It hasn’t happened in centuries, that we know of. I haven’t found in what records we do have anything to contradict what we’ve seen.”

Annabeth frowned, guessing Ketevan’s theory.

“I won’t say the idea didn’t occur to me,” she said. “What about the simultaneous event in France? Isn’t that contradictory?”

“Not if two of them came at once,” Ketevan said. “We don’t know that isn’t possible.”

“I’m sorry,” one of the junior investigators broke in. “I’m missing something, and I don’t think I’m alone.”

The other junior investigators nodded their agreement. Annabeth panned a gaze over them.

“We’re talking about outworlders,” she said.

## Chapter 275

### I Suggest You Be Very Polite

Jason was standing on the edge of the roof, atop a tall building in the Sydney CBD. Shade was beside him as they looked toward an adjacent building. To normal sight it was unremarkable, but to magic senses the building was lit up like a giant candle. The top floor was a dancing flame of overlapped enchantments.

“I see what you mean,” Jason said. “It does seem like a lot of trouble to go to if it isn’t their headquarters.”

Shade had been watching the people who had investigated the hospital incident. Jason’s suspicions about the existence of native magic were confirmed when Shade spotted a pair of essence users. Their iron-rank senses had no chance of detecting him and he followed them to the building he and Jason were now looking at.

While Shade could evade even most bronze-rank senses, he didn’t risk approaching the enchantments in place on the Building’s upper floors. They weren’t very advanced, falling easily within Jason’s level of ritual magic expertise; just basic protection and detection enchantments, made permanent through artifice no greater than Jason’s skill-book derived skills.

What the magical protections lacked in individual sophistication, they made up in the complexity with which they were interwoven. Having so many effects integrated into one another without mutual interference was an impressive feat. Breaking through or sneaking past any individual effect would be a breeze for Jason, but with them pressed so snugly against one another, he could easily trigger one defence in the process of breaking through another.

Jason postulated that the simplicity of the rituals was not from lack of proficiency, but a need to work with the low density of ambient magic. Whoever devised the protections made the most of the restriction to low-rank formations and integrated them together, a feat not possible with more powerful effects. The low-rank magical array made it easier to avoid tricky magical interactions. Only something on the level of Jason’s cloud flask had the capacity to neatly amalgamate more powerful magic.

The more he examined the magical emplacements, the more impressed he became. The cumulative effect of such basic abilities would be surprisingly tricky to deal with, reminding Jason of Clive’s insistence on Jason gaining a deeper understanding of magic. Based on his early knowledge of ritual magic, coming from skill books alone, Jason would

have dismissed the danger of the simple enchantments. Only his study into the underlying principles of ritual magic allowed him to recognise the trap.

“What do they have in the way of numbers?” Jason asked. Shade had tasked one of his bodies with watching the comings and goings since finding the building.

“I have, thus far, noted eight different bronze-rankers, almost two dozen iron-rankers and one silver.”

“A silver,” Jason said, frowning.

“Their auras all show signs of heavy monster core use,” Shade said. “It seems to be the primary method for advancement.”

“Where are they getting monster cores?” Jason wondered aloud. “I can understand how I didn’t know about the secret society of magic people, but I don’t think I’d have missed monsters spawning all over the world.”

“It would appear that your world has mysteries we need to unravel,” Shade said.

“So it would,” Jason said, fishing his phone from his pocket to check the time.

He would have preferred to keep the phone in his inventory, but that would have cut it off from the networks. This was not just a factor of the dimensional displacement of his personal storage space, but also the state of stasis objects entered while in his inventory. He would like to experiment with the basic artifice technique that his magical watch used to keep time when stored away, but he didn’t have the materials.

It was almost time for the appointment Hiro had set up for Jason with the leader of Hiro’s criminal organisation. Jason didn’t know how the local organised crime was structured but he didn’t much care. He had been surprised that, rather than some clandestine meeting spot, the meeting was in the heart of the city, in a building not far from the one he was standing on.

Jason leapt off the roof as his shadow cloak formed around him. He had, in his personal opinion, grossly underutilised the ability to glide that it acquired at bronze-rank. The only properly tall building he had encountered after obtaining the power was the tower in the astral space, which he’d been a bit busy to take advantage of. He’d only had one opportunity to jump off of it, and instead of being held aloft by his cloak, he was weighed down by the nest of stone spikes impaling his body.

His cloak spread out wide, like a pair of giant wings made of darkness and stars, with Shade gliding alongside. It was eerily quiet, with only the distant sounds of the street below.

“This a decidedly indiscreet practice in the middle of the day,” Shade pointed out.

“What’s that?” Jason asked. “I couldn’t hear you over the sound of how awesome this is.”

“Mr Asano, I’m not physically capable of giving a weary sigh, but if I were, I would be doing so quite pointedly in response.”

Jason laughed as he started testing out his control over the glide. As with most powers, he had an instinctive proficiency. While he would obviously improve with practice, basic control came to him quite naturally. He quickly got a handle on turning in a curving arc, descending to gain speed and even catching updrafts to regain a little altitude. After playing around for a while, he opened up his map ability and set a waypoint for his destination.

As he neared the ground, Jason projected his aura in a directed fashion that normal people could sense. He did so to two points, well to either side of his chosen landing point. He tried to be subtle yet attention-grabbing, so that all eyes turned away as he dismissed his cloak and dropped the last few metres into a silent landing. The momentary flash of aura passed, leaving the people on the street looking slightly disoriented.

“This is not a reliable method for avoiding attention,” Shade said quietly enough that only Jason could hear.

“You worry too much. If someone sees me, they won’t believe their eyes, especially if I gaslight them a little.”

“I am your shadow, Mr Asano, not your conscience.”

“Yet here you are chiding me,” Jason said merrily as he tugged his jacket into place. A suit generally wasn’t the best hang gliding outfit, but Gilbert’s suit, as always, was easily up to the task. The design had more flair than a design from his own world, but Jason didn’t hate being a little flashy.

He made his way into the nearby building entrance, across a large and pleasantly light-filled atrium to the reception desk.

“Jason Asano for Victor Tollman,” he said.

\*\*\*

Victor Tollman was a large man. In his football days he’d been a decent ruckman. His gym work became a little harder and it took a little longer with each passing year, but he maintained excellent health and physique well into his fifties. He had a friendly face and salt and pepper hair, with a neat beard to match.

He was sitting in his office, in a huge leather chair that seemed large even to his sizeable frame. If not for the swivel base, it would have made a halfway decent throne. His desk was a piece of oak the size of a single bed.

Victor was watching a live feed of the reception security cameras, but the image was distorted, centred on the man standing in front of the reception desk.

“Can you hide from cameras like that?” Victor asked the man standing beside him, likewise watching the screen.

“Yes,” Vermillion said.

Vermillion had pale skin, dark hair and narrow but sleekly-handsome features. He was tall and looked to be in his mid-twenties, although Victor suspected the man was older. He wore an impeccable black suit that cost more than Jason’s last car. Of course, Jason’s last car had been a rather dismal bomb, which he hadn’t given a thought to with Shade on hand.

“Is he one of you?” Victor asked.

“Perhaps,” Vermillion said, “but most likely not. I’ll know once he gets up here.”

“What else might he be?”

“I’ve warned you about fishing for information, Victor,” Vermillion gently admonished. “Too much knowledge and too little power is a volatile admixture.”

“Instead of withholding knowledge, you could just give me power,” Victor suggested.

Vermillion shook his head, a faint smile on his lips. “You’re relentless, Victor.”

“That’s the footy player in me,” Victor said. “You’ve got to be hungry if you’re going to win.”

\*\*\*

Jason followed a blank-faced office worker from the elevator and down a corridor that terminated in a large set of wooden double doors. The functionary dramatically pushed them both open to grant access to the room beyond. It was more akin to one of Emir’s cloud palace lounges than an office, taking up a full third of the top floor, with two stellar corner views. It resembled the inside of a gentlemen’s club, with multiple sets of leather chairs and couches, a movie projector and two separate bars.

If it was a gentlemen’s club, though, the gentlemen in question were of the unrefined sort. The walls were covered in paraphernalia glorifying football. From the preponderance of Collingwood merchandise, Jason guessed that Victor Tollman was originally a Melbournian.

The only part that looked even remotely like an office had a leather throne behind what was either a very robust desk, or a somewhat rickety boat. Walking around from behind it were two men, who Jason turned his attention to as the office worker left, closing the doors behind her.

The larger of the two men was older, but vigorous, judging by sight and aura both. He reminded Jason of Hiro's thug, Growl, but with fewer steroids and more brains. The younger man looked like a sexy mortician. His aura was bronze-rank and rather disconcerting in its familiarity. It reminded Jason of the vampires he had fought in the past, but without the wild savagery of those turned by a monster. This man was clearly of a different breed, with a clean, controlled aura.

The younger man stayed back while the older one came forward to boisterously shake Jason's hand. The physical contact brought up the man's information.

- 
- Victor Tollman
  - Human (normal rank)
- 

"G'day, mate," Victor greeted.

"G'day," Jason said. "If I'd known you were a Collingwood supporter, I might not have come."

Victor snorted derision.

"Go the mighty pies," he said with a grin, then moved aside, a clear invitation for the other man. The tall, pale man stepped forward and Jason offered his hand. After a brief pause, the man shook it.

- 
- Craig Vermillion
  - Greater Vampire (Human, araneid bloodline, bronze rank)
- 

"Jason Asano," Jason introduced himself. "Just call me Jason. Mind if I call you Craig?"

The tall man's lips pressed thinly together but he otherwise didn't react as he let go of Jason's hand.

"I go by Vermillion, professionally."

"No worries, mate," Jason said with a grin. Jason had grown a few centimetres taller with the ascension to bronze rank, but he was still towered over by the two men.

"You can just call me Vic," Victor said. "Let's park it, yeah? One of the good things about being rich as buggery is owning good chairs."

They sat down in a trio of lounge chairs around a low table.

"Would you like some refreshments?" Victor asked. "There's nothing really worth drinking at noon on a Tuesday, but I can have someone bring in water, coffee, tea..."



"I'm fine, thank you," Jason said. "You asked to see me, presumably because you heard about what happened with Ari."

"Yep," Victor acknowledged.

Jason then turned to Vermillion.

"How much does he know?" Jason asked.

"He's had a glimpse," Vermillion said. "He knows what I am and that there are other things out there. Enough to see that there are dangers he is unequipped to combat."

"Dangers you are equipped to meet," Jason chuckled. "In return for certain accommodations."

"Yes," Vermillion said unashamedly. "What have you told your uncle?"

"That if I tell him anymore, he may find himself involved with those dangers you mentioned."

Victor didn't show it on his face, but Jason could see the frustration in Victor's aura. He guessed that Victor was unaware that his emotions could be read through his aura. Vermillion presumably kept quiet about it for his own advantage. As for Vermillion, his controlled aura revealed none of his emotions, at least to Jason's aura senses. It was an unusual level of control for a someone not an essence user.

"Those dangers may not be something you can keep from your uncle's door," Victor said. "The EOA have seized control in Perth and Melbourne, and now they're making no secret of their overtures into Sydney."

Jason had already guessed that the EOA to be more than ordinary criminals, although it was postulation based on very little information. It was starting to look like his world had an entire ecosystem of hidden magic, which Jason needed to learn about before he stumbled into trouble.

"What is it that you want from me?" Jason asked Victor.

"I have a level of cooperation with Vermillion's organisation," Victor said. "They are unwilling to expand the scope of that when the EOA come knocking at my door. When I heard that someone else from his general circle was affiliated with one of my employees, I wanted to see if we could come to an arrangement."

"We cannot," Jason said flatly. "I'm not going to step into your fight."

Victor could not provide Jason with the kind of information he needed. Further, he wanted Jason to jump into a fight without understanding the sides, which was the opposite of Jason's own intentions. It was Vermillion who had something to offer Jason.

"What about your uncle?" Victor asked.

“He is under my protection,” Jason said. “That protection does not extend to you or your interests.”

“I can offer you substantial benefits,” Victor said. “You would be surprised at what I can accomplish, when sufficiently motivated.”

“You would be surprised at what I can accomplish, when sufficiently motivated,” Jason said in turn. He didn’t reinforce his words with his aura, but it wasn’t necessary. Although it didn’t show in his body language, a ripple of fear passed through Victor’s aura.

Jason had once fought a team in a mirage chamber, using movie-monster theatrics to stir fear and disorient them. It only worked because they were as naïve as he was, and he cringed when thinking back to what he now considered a buffoonish display.

While it had barely been a year since then, it had been a year in which Jason had walked through blood and death. He no longer had to make a foolish imitation of being dangerous; his experiences, attitude, training and transformed body had brought about a transfiguration.

Jason’s old, frivolous self had increasingly become a mask he had to put on, and with months of constant fighting, he hadn’t put it on in a while. Wading through a sea of monsters, the only people around him had been his trusted friends and most reviled enemies. After all that, the mask didn’t fit as neatly as it used to.

To the kind of people who recognised it, Jason unconsciously radiated danger. Even with his aura hidden, it was in his body language. It was in the way he moved and the way he watched everything around him. It was in his confidence, an unassailable self-assurance. Ari had picked up on it even before Jason unleashed his aura, and Victor was a lot sharper than Ari.

“I’d like to go over some of the things I could do for you,” Victor said. “And your uncle, as well.”

“No,” Jason said firmly. “I suspected that you might have some kind of offer along those lines, but I want to be unambiguous in rejecting it. I know this isn’t what you want to hear and I want this to be an amicable relationship, but I’ve just got back from further away than you know there is distance to go. I don’t know the local situation or the local players and I’m not even going to consider intervening until I have a better understanding of the pool I’m paddling in.”

Jason gave Victor a genuine smile, to cut the tension.

“To be honest, Mr Tollman – Vic – I came here for two reasons. One was to give you some face, so as to not cause trouble for my uncle. The other was to meet Vermillion.”

Jason turned to the pale man, who had been largely content to sit back, eyes never leaving Jason.

“I’d like to meet privately for a more frank discussion, Mr Vermillion.”

“An information exchange?” Vermillion asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “If Vic, here, can convince you to make another pitch on his behalf once I have a better lay of the land, I’ll listen. I don’t see myself agreeing, but you’ve approached me with courtesy. It’s only fair that I reciprocate.”

Jason stood up. Victor and Vermillion did the same and Jason shook hands with Victor again.

“It was good to meet you, Vic. I’m sorry I can’t give you what you want, but I’ve learned some hard lessons about carelessly picking my fights before.”

“I understand,” Victor said congenially.

“If you’re willing to have a further meeting,” Jason said, shaking Vermillion’s hand, “I’m sure you can find my number.”

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After having one of his staff escort Asano away, Victor walked behind his desk and fell into the big chair.

“That bloke feels unnerving,” Victor said. “That doesn’t mean he’s the real thing, though. Are you sure he’s not just bluffing about being from your circle? It seemed like he was fishing for information.”

“I’m certain,” Vermillion said. He had never encountered an aura as strong and rigidly controlled as Asano’s. It was like an impenetrable sphere, perfectly formed and revealing only what it wanted you to see. It was also stronger than any tier two aura he had encountered by an order of magnitude.

He had almost mistaken it for a tier three aura, and had no doubt that if Asano wanted to hide it from him, he could have. Asano clearly wanted Vermillion to see that he was an essence magician, and not one to be trifled with. Vermillion was frequently the front man for the Cabal’s dealings with the other groups, and Asano was wholly unlike the essence magicians he had encountered from the Network. While he was still an essence magician, Vermillion had no doubt that Asano was a different breed entirely.

“Are you going to meet with him?” Victor asked.

“Yes,” Vermillion said.

“Will you try and convince him for me?”

“No,” Vermillion said. “If he were to pit himself against the EOA, it would cause dangerous ripple effects. I don’t think he’s part of the local ecology. If it weren’t for the family connection, I doubt we would ever have heard of him.”

“So, why is he trying to sell gold?” Victor wondered.

“That is a curiosity,” Vermillion said. “It’s why I bought it. My people are analysing it, chemically and otherwise. This man may be operating independently, although I’m not sure how it’s even possible for someone of his nature to get that strong without support.”

“How strong?” Victor asked. “If he’s alone, would he even be of use against the EOA? How dangerous can one man be?”

“Very, I suspect,” Vermillion said. “But you’re right that taking on an organisation like that alone is a futile gesture. Overcoming the locals would only bring greater threats down on him.”

“Are you telling me to roll over for the EOA?”

“Sometimes the harder path runs right off a cliff, Victor.”

“How would he stack up compared to you, if it came to a fight?”

“I don’t know what he’s capable of,” Vermillion said. “I would avoid one, if possible. My instincts tell me that if I couldn’t... I suggest you be very polite with his uncle.”

## Chapter 276

### A Leather Coat and Tight, Black Pants

Days went past as Jason fell into a routine. In the mornings he would do strength training with the equipment in the townhouse, which was barely adequate for his bronze-rank might at maximum weight. Then he would ride to Rushcutters Bay Park to do some running along the waterfront.

He rode Shade in motorcycle form, as he only had one of Shade's bodies on hand. Shade still kept bodies on Hiro and Taika, while four were assigned to investigating the nest of local essence-users he had found. That left the last with Jason, which was enough to take the form of a sleek, black motorcycle. Jason had gone out and purchased some bike leathers and a helmet for the purpose.

He would wrap up his daily training with some meditation. This was the third pillar of advancing abilities, along with physical training and pushing himself to the limit. As normal for adventuring, being caught up in something like the astral space was heavy on the limit-pushing, with less time for other forms of training. Now that he was away from that, he had the time to balance himself out.

After all the monster fights and the confrontation with the Builder, he could feel the unsettled power within him, waiting to be consolidated. While he was not anticipating monster fights any time soon, he did anticipate his abilities advancing at least one small stage in the short term, maybe even two for the lower ones that were close to advancing already.

His time in the astral space had not been without cost, but it had also massively accelerated his growth. Not only had he crossed the threshold into bronze, but he had jumped into fighting silver-rank monsters much earlier than expected as the magic of the astral space had escalated. The results were striking, bringing him all the way into the lower-mid range of bronze rank.

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#### Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: bronze
- Progression to silver rank: 25%

#### Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Bronze 3].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Bronze 2].

- [Spirit] (Doom): [Bronze 2].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Bronze 3].

### Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

- [Party Interface].
- [Defiant].
- [Spirit Vault].
- [Tactical Map].
- [Astral Affinity].
- [Dark Rider].

### Essences (4/4)

#### Dark [Speed] (5/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Bronze 5] 09%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Bronze 4] 12%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Bronze 4] 41%.
- [Hand of the Reaper] (special ability): [Bronze 2] 94%.
- [Shadow of the Reaper] (familiar): [Bronze 4] 98%.

#### Blood [Power] (5/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Bronze 4] 64%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Bronze 4] 14%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Bronze 3] 02%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Bronze 4] 89%.
- [Haemorrhage] (spell): [Bronze 3] 92%.

#### Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Bronze 4] 15%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Bronze 4] 03%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Bronze 3] 79%.
- [Hegemony] (aura): [Bronze 5] 04%.
- [Castigate] (spell): [Bronze 4] 31%.

#### Doom [Spirit] (5/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Bronze 4] 97%.
- [Punition] (spell): [Bronze 3] 74%.
- [Blade of Doom] (spell): [Bronze 4] 26%.
- [Verdict] (spell): [Bronze 2] 82%.
- [Avatar of Doom] (familiar): [Bronze 4] 16%.

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After his training routine, Jason would move onto the business of the day. This usually meant burying himself in the internet, catching up on all the things he'd missed. Of particular interest were the 'terrorist readiness exercises' taking place around the world, including in Australia.

They had started not long before Jason's departure, but after his year and a half absence, their escalating rate and continued lack of explanation from world governments

was drawing more and more media attention, despite obvious attempts to downplay their importance. Given that one of these incidents was taking place very close to his home at the exact moment Jason had been sucked into another universe, he was deeply interested.

From what he could gather, the exercises involved setting up a restricted area, completely blacking out any attempts to surveil, to the point of using signal jammers and even shooting down camera drones. What they were doing was a mystery he would look into, when the opportunity presented itself. From the rates of occurrence he was seeing, it was only a matter of time.

He also did some online stalking of his family. He watched a few episodes of his sister's new cooking show, checked out the websites for his mother's real estate agency and his father's landscaping business. His father had started a photo blog where he went through the process of developing a double block he bought from a plain stretch of even land into a lush garden home. At least, that was the plan, as he was still in the early stages.

There were other things Jason needed to do, such as continuing the legal process of returning from the dead. Taika had been put at Jason's disposal, serving as driver and rather excellent body man, making many suggestions for how to resolve any minor issues Jason had.

Although Taika looked like a professional wrestler, with his towering height and broad physique, he was actually a friendly, chatty and intelligent man whose company Jason quickly came to appreciate. He would usually arrive at the townhouse in the mid-morning, after Jason's training routine was done, to see if Jason needed anything. One such morning, they sat on the couch playing video games.

"I don't like the courses in this one as much," Taika said. "I think the Wii version had the best track selection in the whole series."

"I won't argue," Jason said. "Trying to get an online game of that now is a bit rough, though."

"Tell me about it."

Jason's phone rang, which was unusual. He had, thus far, only received calls from Taika and Hiro. He got up from the couch and answered it.

"Hello?"

"Mr Asano, this is Craig Vermillion."

The vampire's tone was more personable than the controlled clip he had used when they met in person.

“Mr Vermillion.”

“Craig is fine, when I’m not on the job. I have to play it sinister and mysterious around the normals. Maintain the mystique, you know?”

“Sure,” Jason said.

“If you’re still looking to meet, are you free for lunch?”

“You’re not going to explode when sunlight hits you, are you?” Jason asked, drawing an odd look from Taika.

“I’ll be fine,” Vermillion said, amusement in his voice.

They made plans to meet at a café and Jason went outside, Taika with him.

“You need a ride, bro?” Taika asked.

“No, I’ve got my bike,” Jason said, nodding at Shade’s bike form. Like all of Shade’s vehicle forms, it looked like he’d stolen the plans from Batman.

“Sweet bike,” Taika said. “That wasn’t out here when I came in.”

“My friend left it out here,” Jason said.

“I thought you were going to say it was a self-driving bike.”

“I didn’t know they were a thing,” Jason said. “I’ll have to look into it.”

While Taika moved forward to admire the motorcycle, Jason switched his outfit, mist obscuring him for a few seconds while Taika was looking the other way. When Taika looked back, Jason was in his driving leathers and helmet.

“How did you...?”

“What?” Jason asked.

“You changed your clothes.”

“Nah, mate. I was always wearing this.”

Taika frowned.

“You’re a mysterious guy, bro. There’s a lot about you that doesn’t add up.”

Jason chuckled.

“Mate, you’ve got no idea.”

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“When you picked a café, this isn’t what I expected,” Jason said. Vermillion had led him from the crowded downstairs area to a private upstairs with empty tables and a window wall looking out over the street. The décor was subdued, with hardwood floors and earthy colours.

“I own the place,” Vermillion said. “It offers comfort and convenience for private business.”



“Just give me a second to change,” Jason said, mist shrouding him to replace his bike gear with a casual winter suit. Vermillion was dressed much more casually than their last meeting, with plain slacks and a woollen sweater.

“Are you alright leaving your motorcycle on the street like that?” Vermillion asked.

“That wasn’t a motorcycle,” Jason said, but offered no further explanation. Vermillion looked out on the street, seeing that the bike was no longer where Jason had left it.

“I always envied the convenience of conjured vehicles,” Vermillion said.

“That’s a thing, here?”

“Only one that I know of, here in Sydney. It’s unusual where you spent your time away?”

“Vehicles specifically, yeah, but there’s lots of magic items, magical beast riding. My mate Humphrey rides around on a shape-changing dragon.”

“Really?”

“It’s a baby dragon.”

They sat at a table with comfortable chairs.

“Someone will come up shortly to take our food order,” Vermillion said.

“What kind of dietary restrictions do you have?” Jason asked. “Is it a liquid diet? I don’t know a lot about vampires. The only ones I’ve met were created by a giant blood spider. We didn’t really talk, since they were trying to kill me and my friends.”

“Lesser vampires,” Vermillion said. “They were created by a giant spider? This also happened during your time away?”

“Yep,” Jason said. “It was a rough day, but vampire monster army? That was some epic stuff.

“And where was that?”

“Would you believe an abandoned jungle city in a pocket universe?”

“Not really” Vermillion said.

“Let’s just say southern Africa, then. More or less. What did my gold tell you?”

“What makes you think I have your gold.”

“I got full market price for that gold, which I shouldn’t have, given its shady origins. That means that someone higher up stepped in. It could have been Tollman, looking to make a good first impression, but he would have said something when he was trying to recruit me to his cause.”

“Why would I want it?” Vermillion asked.

“Best guess? You – or the people behind you – saw an essence user acting outside of the norm, almost like he didn’t know what was what. But how could someone like me be

an independent? Where would they get the resources? Why are they doing something as petty as selling mundane gold? So you bought it and you've probably put it through every test you can conceive of."

"You seem very confident," Vermillion said.

"I do, don't I?" Jason said, looking smug. "I'll confess that I'm curious about what you found."

Vermillion shook his head.

"My people are very interested in where that gold came from," he said. "Apparently we tried to trace where it came from and the results were extremely anomalous."

"I'll bet they were," Jason chuckled. "Who are your people, exactly?"

"The Cabal," Vermillion said. "I would have thought that was obvious."

"Never heard of them," Jason said. "I've been out of town."

"The Cabal is everywhere."

"I've been really far out of town," Jason said. "I suspect your concept of everywhere is due for expansive revision."

"By all means, expand my horizons," Vermillion said.

"I can do that," Jason said. "I'd like to get a handle on the local colour, first."

"If you genuinely don't know what the Cabal is," Vermillion said, "then you certainly have some catching up to do. How much do you know?"

"Just imagine that I got sucked into an alternate universe and came back with magic powers to find out there was magic hidden in my world all along."

Vermillion raised his eyebrows.

"Hypothetically," Jason added.

Vermillion leaned back in his chair.

"I can certainly tell you what isn't any great secret," Vermillion said. "To people like us, anyway. To regular people it would be the biggest secret in the world, but we're a long way beyond regular people."

"Vast magical power does change your perspective, somewhat, doesn't it?"

"The first thing you need to know about the magical world is that there are three dominant forces within it. There are smaller, localised groups, scrabbling after table scraps. They know about magic, but that knowledge is fragmentary at best and they have little, if any magic they command for themselves."

"Like our friend Victor."

"Exactly like our friend Victor," Vermillion agreed. "There are also some groups that orbit the larger organisations. Families that have known the truth for centuries, that kind of

thing. They vary in power, directly related to their influence within the groups to which they are attached.”

“And it’s these three big groups that are the real players?”

“Exactly,” Vermillion said. “The oldest, and most reclusive, is the Cabal. I’m a member, and my knowledge is extremely limited. Most of what I do know, I’m not allowed to share.”

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “What’s the outside perspective of your group?”

“The Cabal represents the old magic of this world. Things older than history that dwell in the dark places.”

“Like vampires,” Jason said.

“Yes. Proper vampires, not the puppets of some essence magician.”

“I’ve heard of essence users making vampires,” Jason said. “Where I’ve just been, it’s frowned upon.”

“As it is, here,” Vermillion said. “These lesser vampires, running around killing people. Even putting aside the moral repugnance, which I don’t think you should, it just makes things harder for those of us doing the right thing.”

“I was meaning to ask about that,” Jason said. “I’ve been wondering about your views on killing and eating people, because I take a dim view on it. People have tried to kill and eat me before and I didn’t care for it.”

“That is the purview of lesser vampires,” Vermillion said. “They can’t feed without killing, so we put them down whenever we find them.”

“And what about you?” Jason asked. “You do drink blood, yes?”

Vermillion was about to answer when a waitress came in from downstairs. She only had one menu, which she handed to Jason.

“It’s your place,” Jason said. “What’s good.”

“Beef carpaccio,” Vermillion said without hesitation.

“Okay,” Jason said, handing back the menu without looking at it.

“Same for me,” Vermillion said. “Thank you, Anika.”

The waitress withdrew downstairs.

“Blood is an unfortunate necessity,” Vermillion said. “There is no need to kill for it, though. In fact, people can’t wait to give it away.”

“Oh?”

“We’ve cultivated entire subcultures,” Vermillion said. “With a leather coat and tight, black pants, we get more blood and sex than we can consume. Literally more. I know

people who have done their best to thin out the supply, as it were, but they didn't even make a dent. There are always more young people, looking for a thrill."

"Is it harmful?"

"No more than donating blood," Vermillion said. "In fact, being fed on actually heightens resistance to most diseases."

"Really?"

"It surprised us too," Vermillion said. "Back in the eighties, the Cabal conducted some studies into the potential dangers of blood-borne disease transmission by our more sanguinely-oriented members. It turns out that rather than spread disease, the people we feed on are statistically less likely to get some of the nastier diseases floating around."

"You conducted studies?" Jason asked.

"We didn't have them published, obviously. They were conducted with rigour by experts in the field, however, and disseminated through our own channels."

"And obviously, sunlight is not an issue for your kind," Jason said. It was the kind of cold, clear winter day where the sky was pristine blue. Sunlight washed in through the large window, pleasantly lighting up the room.

"It's a matter of magic," Vermillion said. "Weaker members of my kind are affected by sunlight, and I've heard of stronger vampires being affected by it in unusual situations where the magic around them is more powerful."

"Interesting," Jason mused. "I'd have to assume the ambient magic infuses the sunlight with properties antithetical to your condition. I have a friend who probably understands the process. How harmful is sunlight, exactly?"

"When it's strong enough to affect us, we're weaker and slower. Not down to a baseline human level, but I couldn't speak for some of those higher-magic situations. I don't know the circumstances in which they took place, so I'm largely going from second-hand knowledge. It also makes our more unusual powers harder or even impossible to use."

"You don't seem hesitant about sharing your weaknesses," Jason observed.

"These aren't secrets," Vermillion said. "Once you've spent any time in the magical community, you won't find that information hard to come by."

"But you aren't affected by this level of magic?" Jason asked.

"Not at all," Vermillion said. "Only the weakest of our kind are."

"But your Cabal doesn't have just your kind, do they?"

“No,” Vermillion said. “Aside from individuals looking to follow their own paths, all the old magic falls under our aegis. We have many factions, within our ranks, but we unified as the normals became more dangerous with the rise of technology.”

“Old magic, as opposed to new magic?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Vermillion said. “You are an essence magician, yes?”

“Yes.”

“That is what we call the new magic.”

## Chapter 277

### A Knife in Its Sheath

Vermillion and Jason paused their conversation as the waitress brought their food, along with wine.

“Magic has always been a difficult and esoteric thing,” Vermillion explained after the waitress left, while Jason nibbled appreciatively at the food. “Some five centuries ago, a new kind of magic appeared. People with no connection to the old ways could suddenly wield a variety of easy to use mystical powers. At that time, they were a limited threat. They were collected into various secret societies around the world, hoarding their knowledge. Most importantly, they seemed to have a limit on their power. While it can take centuries, many of the Cabal’s members can slowly accrue power over time. I have been a vampire for seventy years, which is long enough to reach the second tier of power.”

“How do you name the tiers?” Jason asked. While the naming conventions would be subjective, the thresholds between magical ranks were not.

“There have been many terms of categorisation, across culture and language,” Vermillion said.

“I was taught to call them ranks,” Jason said.

“As the magical communities have become increasingly interrelated, the need for a shared terminology has led to numeric designations that are widely recognised. Whether you call them tiers, categories, realms or ranks, like you, the same numbers are recognised across the board.”

“So, what are the numbers?”

“It starts with zero,” Vermillion explained. “That’s people who don’t have enough magic to cross the first, transformative threshold and become a true entity of magic. This is the one tier where the lines can blur a little.”

“Oh?”

“Take blood servants for example.”

“Blood servants?”

“Normal humans who have partaken of vampire blood, without going through the process of transformation. They gain superhuman strength and speed, depending on the strength of the blood. They may even reach the power of the first or even second tier, but this is temporary. Without regular infusions of vampire blood, that power fades.”

“That can’t be good,” Jason said. “As far as I’m aware, backsliding in rank has extremely deleterious effects.”

Jason had heard about the side effects of ex-clergy who had offended their gods and been stripped of divinely-gifted essences. This caused frequently debilitating imbalance in the body and soul.

“Very much so,” Vermillion said. “There is also a strongly addictive aspect to vampire blood, which is why the cultivation of blood servants is a widely frowned upon practice in modern times. Just recently, we had a problem with someone quietly building up a large force of blood servants.”

“So, the other tiers are what you’d expect, lowest to highest?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Vermillion said. “That puts you and I at tier two of five.”

“Not six?” Jason asked.

“Six? I know there is a small handful of category four creatures within the cabal, but they spend decades at a time in magical sleep, slowly accumulating the magic required to operate for even a short time. The fifth tier is a myth itself, let alone beyond. From everything I’ve ever heard, category five is the limit.”

“The mortal limit,” Jason said.

“I’d be very interested in hearing more about that,” Vermillion said.

“I don’t doubt it,” Jason said. “Consider it a teaser for what I can offer when I’m looking for a favour from the Cabal.”

“I will,” Vermillion said. “I suspect my people will be very interested. In the meantime, I’ll continue my explanation of new magic.”

“Please do.”

“For centuries, the power of this new magic was trapped at the lowest tier.”

“That changed, though, didn’t it?”

“Yes. Our people investigated the rise of this new magic, which took place over the space of several decades, all around the world. Even amongst civilisations not yet discovered by the wider world, such as the indigenous cultures of this region of the Pacific. What our inquiries ultimately uncovered was that one person was responsible for all of it.”

“One person?”

“That’s right. One person, whose command of this new magic was more potent than anything seen since. Someone who could change their face and speak any language. We believe this person seeded these secret societies of new magic. Providing what we now know to be the essences that facilitate new magic. For centuries, though, new magic was limited and weak. It had few users, none of whom possessed any great power. But as you said, that changed.”

“What happened?” Jason asked.

“We aren’t certain, but the change appears to have been a fundamental one to the very nature of the world. Somewhere around the turn of the nineteenth century, some manner of global threat began to manifest. It was at this point that we realised that these secret societies had been prepared specifically to combat this threat.”

“What kind of threat?”

“Monstrous entities. Myths come to life. These secret societies had some way of seeing them coming and preventing them from arriving. We only saw what happened when they failed, which was the appearance of strange creatures.”

“Let me guess,” Jason said. “The more they confronted these threats, the stronger these new magicians became.”

“Indeed,” Vermillion said. “I only know limited amounts about these threats, but I know they have grown stronger and more frequent over the last century or so. Over time, these secret societies realised that they were all akin, using the same methods and powers. The means by which they detect the threats is the same.”

“Which is what?” Jason asked.

“Some manner of mystical grid, crossing the entire globe. We believe it was set up by the person who founded the societies, in preparation for their future purpose.”

“So, these secret societies all work together, now?”

“Yes,” Vermillion said. “They call themselves the Network. With their growth in number and power over the last century, they have become the strongest of the three major magical factions.”

“The terrorist readiness exercises,” Jason said.

“The increasing rate of these threats has made the Network stronger,” Vermillion said, “but the danger is escalating faster than the network’s power to meet it. They needed to scale up their operations to a level they simply couldn’t as a hidden organisation. More and more creatures were slipping through the cracks. It became harder and harder to hide. A little over three years ago, they made a very dangerous decision and revealed themselves to a variety of world governments.”

“They didn’t turn to the other magical organisations?”

“The Cabal would never expose themselves to that degree,” Vermillion said. “As for the third organisation, covering up magic is not in alignment with their principles.”

“And who are this third organisation?”

“The Engineers of Ascension,” Vermillion said.

“The Engineers of... are you talking about the EOA?”



“The very same,” Vermillion said. “As you have no doubt surmised, they are much less reticent about revealing themselves than the other organisations. While their true nature remains hidden it’s only barely.”

“Victor Tollman wanted me to stand against the EOA,” Jason said. “I’m confident in my abilities, but I can’t take on one of the dominant magical forces on the planet by myself.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Vermillion said. “The EOA is very decentralised as a movement. They tend to operate in clusters, which makes them flexible and resilient as a whole, but they’re much less protective of their individual members. They seem to like the freedom, but it makes dealing with them inconsistent, although with fewer repercussions. If you take out some Cabal or Network members, those organisations will come down on you like the fist of god.”

“To make an example,” Jason said.

“Exactly. The EOA is more likely to cut their losses, write them off as having overestimated their abilities. While they work toward broad goals, they are, by their nature, self-serving.”

“And what is that nature, exactly?”

“The Engineers of Ascension are largely made up of those who came to magic from outside the normal channels. I mentioned the smaller groups, fighting for scraps left by the old magic of the Cabal and the new magic of the Network. The EOA were formed by the strongest of those groups. Their magic is cobbled together from what they’ve managed to beg, borrow or steal. It might make them seem like poor cousins, and many from the cabal and the Network see it that way.”

“You don’t agree with your Cabal brethren?” Jason asked.

“I think that dismissing the EOA is foolish. They have been the driving force of magic innovation in modern times. New magic seems set in its forms, while the cabal is set in its ways. The EOA are pushing boundaries. Not without consequences, but also not without results.”

“The drugged-up thugs I’ve been hearing about?”

“Magical enhancement is the core of their magical research. In that case, old school alchemy combined with modern pharmaceutical approaches.”

“Magical performance enhancing drugs,” Jason said.

“Something like that,” Vermillion said. “The EOA’s desire to research blood servants has caused some conflicts with my organisation. We don’t like it when people kidnap our people to use as research materials.”

“They’re willing to take that risk?” Jason asked.

“The EOA has been behind the pack from the beginning,” Vermillion said. “A large part of their ability to keep up is a willingness to go further than the rest of us.”

“Further how?”

“Magical body modification. Reanimating the dead. Nothing is off the table in the pursuit of transhumanism through magic.”

“Engineers of Ascension,” Jason said. “They’re trying to magically engineer themselves to a higher state.”

“Exactly,” Vermillion said. “The EOA knows they can’t compete with the history of the Cabal or the resources of the Network. They know they have to chart their own path, into areas the hegemonic powers won’t touch. There’s a price to that, but they’ve proven themselves willing to pay it.”

“They want to be the next stage of humanity,” Jason said. “What does that have to do with taking control of criminal underworlds?”

“Their driving goal is to prepare for magic being revealed to the world,” Vermillion said.

“Wouldn’t that put them in direct competition with the other organisations, who are trying to hide it?”

“It would, if the EOA ever made attempts to reveal it, but they don’t. They believe that the wider revelation about magic is inevitable, so they’re happy to play along with keeping it a secret. They’re far more loose with it than the rest of us, but they’re careful not to cross anyone’s bottom line. They’re convinced that the truth will come out, despite what anyone might do to hide it. If anything, the longer that takes, the longer they have to prepare.”

“Are they right?” Jason asked.

“Probably,” Vermillion said. “I know my people are becoming increasingly concerned, and the Network has already taken drastic steps. Once the Network started involving governments, we moved past the point where so many people know that it’s not really a secret anymore. Add in the progress of technology and it’s almost surprising that it hasn’t come out yet. In my opinion, these terrorist readiness exercises are the last gasp of the secret world before it comes out into the open.”

“So, what do the EOA want?” Jason asked. “How are they preparing for the truth to come out?”

“They believe that once magic is out in the open, there will be a fundamental shift in how societies function.”

“They think those with magic will be a new ruling class?”

“At the very least, magic will be on par with money and political power,” Vermillion confirmed. “The EOA are the poor third cousin in the magical community, but they’re still swimming in the big kids’ pool. They’re looking to position themselves for when the truth comes out and the Network had already insinuated themselves with political powers, so the EOA are working on private powers. Organised crime is really a second-tier priority, to which they’ve relegated their lesser members. The real game is the uber-wealthy.”

“I can see how it would be an easy pitch,” Jason said. “Offer the people who can buy anything the thing that can’t be bought.”

“Precisely,” Vermillion said. “The EOA have made some solid strides into longevity treatments with minimal side-effects, compared to their more radical developments in body modification. Once magic comes out, they’ll be able to market it openly.”

“The other organisations aren’t competing with them over influencing the wealthy?”

“The Network seems satisfied with political influence,” Vermillion said. “At least, as far as I know. They seem focused on their mission, but they may be making plans behind the scenes. As for the Cabal, we’ve had a tight grip on old money since literally the invention of money.”

“And religion, too, I’m guessing.”

“I can neither confirm, nor deny,” Vermillion said with a smile, leading Jason to chuckle.

“The pie is large enough that no one is willing to go to war over a larger slice,” Vermillion said. “So long as nothing comes along to change that balance, the revelation should be fairly smooth, for the magical community. As for the normals, that’s a whole other issue. Who knows what kinds of chaos will happen, not to mention the dangers we’ve always been wary of. Magical power and ideology have traditionally been highly reactive compounds.”

“There have been issues in the past?”

“There have. I’m not looking forward to when aggressive countries start weaponising magic. The Russians already keep invading people and I hesitate to even talk about North Korea or the Middle East. The US is bad enough with combat drones. Do you want to see magic combat drones?”

“Does it make me a bad person if I say yes?” Jason asked. “I mean, magic, flying death robots? You have to admit, that’s pretty awesome.”

“Not if you’re some kid in Yemen who’s learned to fear the sky,” Vermillion said.

“That’s disappointingly fair,” Jason conceded.

“Those are the basics you need to know about the secret world of magic. I still have no idea how you could possibly have reached your level of strength without knowing any of this. The Network has a tight grip on new magic, although you are different than they are, for the most part.”

“How so?” Jason asked.

“There’s something in their auras that isn’t in yours. I’ve only seen one of their members of any real power that didn’t have it. He’s not the strongest, being a low end category two, but he also seems more capable than the others.”

“Interesting,” Jason mused, absently tapping a finger to his lips. His guess was that the local essence users used monster cores heavily, while one of them was advancing himself without.

“I think my people know more about where you’ve been than they’re telling me,” Vermillion confessed.

“What did your people tell you?” Jason asked.

“Not much,” Vermillion admitted. “That’s par for the course, with the Cabal, but I like knowing that they’ll protect my secrets as fastidiously as the organisation’s. I’m pretty sure they have some idea of where you’ve been. They told me to do my best to maintain a friendly channel of communication.”

“I think you’ve done a bang-up job,” Jason said with a friendly smile. “I am going to be checking up on local vampire dining habits, though. Thank you for all this information.”

“I haven’t revealed anything that you couldn’t easily learn elsewhere,” Vermillion said. “One piece of advice: If you’re going to affiliate yourself with one of the organisations, it has to be the Network. The reasons should be obvious.”

“I’m an essence user,” Jason said. “They’re the group with the means to make me stronger.”

“Exactly,” Vermillion said. “Even after learning that essences were behind new magic, we never bothered to acquire that power for ourselves. We just don’t have the means to develop it. The EOA has a small handful of essence users, but they aren’t strong. My people are definitely interested in you, but they wanted me to point you in the Network’s direction. A show of good faith.”

“I’ll take it,” Jason said, reaching across the table to shake Vermillion’s hand.

He stood up, then paused, his face taking on a fierce expression.

“Have you set up an ambush?”

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Vermillion was unsure what to make of Jason Asano, who was a nest of strange dichotomies. At a glance, Asano was open and friendly, even a little hapless. This was belied by the intelligent eyes, whether they were taking everything in or focused in an incisive gaze. Although his body language was casual, Vermillion had no doubt that Asano was listening intently. He could almost see the cogs turning behind his eyes, giving him the impression that for every one thing he said, Asano took away three.

That fortress wall of an aura was nowhere on display, completely undetectable to Vermillion's senses. He was beginning to understand what normals felt like under his own aura manipulation. Asano had the feeling of a knife in its sheath, which Vermillion was not unfamiliar with. He had met many dangerous people in his long life. It made little sense, then, that Asano could be so unversed in the wider magical world.

Vermillion's initial thought was that Asano was feigning an implausible level of ignorance. As he continued to talk and Asano continued to listen, he eventually concluded that Asano genuinely didn't know even the most basic aspects of what he was being told. He was clearly no stranger to magic, however.

Asano's history gave away little. Until a year and a half ago, he had been, to any and all investigation, an ordinary man. He grew up in a small town, attended a private school for the kids of wealthy seachangers. Went to the University of Melbourne, dropped out after one semester and got a menial job in retail.

Then his apartment was mysteriously destroyed during one the Network's sham terrorist exercises, in which he apparently died by magical mishap. He mysteriously returned a year and a half later, with no more explanation than his departure, but a lot more power.

The persona Asano generally affected was in line with his history, prior to his disappearance. Was it always something he put on, having held this power before he went away? Vermillion guessed not, given what seemed like an authentic lack of knowledge. Asano had gone somewhere and been profoundly changed, but where?

Vermillion suspected the Cabal knew, but kept it from him. It was more likely out of habit than maliciousness, but still rankled. Most likely, it was related to whatever threat the network was facing off, given that it seemed to be the source of their power. Given that Asano's power was the same, that made sense.

Asano was unlike any member of the Network Vermillion had met, however, and he had met his share. Even compared to the tier three essence magician stationed in Sydney, Asano was a different breed. His aura was clearly discernible as tier two, but far too powerful for that. It was closer to the strength of a tier three, but with more control than he

had seen from any tier. The control of other essence magicians he'd seen were lumps of iron ore next to Asano's expertly forged sword.

Over the course of their conversation, Vermilion came to believe that despite the danger behind his eyes, Asano might actually be as friendly as what he initially assumed to be his artificial persona. He was certainly easy to get along with. Then, as they were about to part, Asano's gaze turned as sharp as a knife.

"Have you set up an ambush?" Asano asked.

"No," Vermillion said. "If I was going to set up an ambush, I wouldn't do it in my own place. I'd also bring a lot more people, if I was ambushing you."

"There are a lot more people."

"What are you talking about..."

Vermillion trailed off as a number of magical auras came into range of his senses. They were converging on the café from the outside, as well as the alley running behind. He recognised the auras, the blank power of the EOA's alchemically juiced-up thugs.

"I think things are about to go very poorly," he said.

## Chapter 278

### Underworld Bargain

"I don't recognise the auras," Jason said.

"Engineers of Ascension," Vermillion said. "Their alchemically-enhanced foot soldiers. This may not go well."

"I can live with that," Jason said. "Sooner or later, I'll have to make an example of someone."

"It isn't prison rules, Mr Asano."

"Maybe not to you," Jason said. "I'm all alone and surrounded by dangerous people who, as it turns out, are already in gangs."

Vermillion frowned.

"Will you at least allow me to try and de-escalate the situation?"

"This is your establishment and I'm your guest," Jason said. "I'll defer to you."

"Thank you."

Jason sat down again, his back to the door as he watched casually out the window and poured himself another glass of wine. Vermillion pulled out his phone.

"Anika, some people are about to come in. Please direct them upstairs immediately and try not to disturb the customers. Thank you."

Shortly thereafter, a dozen men came up the stairs. They each had the swollen musculature and vacant stare of a homoerotic action figure. Each was wearing a tight, white t-shirt and dark green cargo pants. They looked like someone was cloning thugs and selling them in job lots.

Only one of the men had clear, intelligent eyes. He was just as muscular as the others, but wore a shirt and slacks, with leather shoes instead of sneakers. He stood at the front, directing his gaze at Vermillion, who stepped forward to meet him.

"Mr Kissling," Vermillion greeted coldly.

"Mr Vermillion," Kissling responded. "We're sorry to intrude, but we need to take the man sitting behind you."

Jason didn't react, continuing to watch the street below with a glass of wine in his hand.

"We have no quarrel with the Cabal, and will be happy to compensate you and your organisation for your cooperation in this matter."

“This man is in my establishment, at my invitation, as my guest,” Vermillion said. “Your words may be polite, sir, but your actions are just the opposite. If you wish to take this man, you have to go through me.”

“You may wish to think though the ramifications of denying us, Mr Vermillion. I know that your group is remaining hands-off in regards to the activities of mine. If you stand in our way now, you are making a choice for your entire faction.”

“Am I meant to allow any trespass the EOA wishes to make because they claim it involves larger political forces? That is a cheap tactic, Mr Kissling.”

“It is no cheap tactic, Mr Vermillion. Your Cabal has sensibly chosen to step aside as we pursue our interests, but this man has not. He is a legitimate obstacle to our intentions.”

“I think, Mr Kissling, that you are labouring under a misconception. I was present when Victor Tollman asked Mr Asano for his assistance in resisting your encroachment. Mr Asano flatly declined.”

“The fact remains that his uncle is a part of the regime we are going to displace. Will he just stand aside when we come for his uncle?”

“Perhaps rather than take actions we all come to regret,” Vermillion suggested, “we can sit down and discuss a compromise.”

Kissling rubbed his chin as he considered it, his henchman army lined up behind him like soldiers in a row.

“It can’t hurt to at least talk,” he said. Vermillion nodded gratefully, leading Kissling over to the table, where they sat down to join Jason. Jason didn’t react, continuing to look out the window, sipping at his wine.

“Good day, Mr Asano,” Kissling said. “We have no more quarrel with you than with Mr Vermillion or his people. The crux of the matter is whether you will interfere with our interests. If I can’t get assurances from you, then I am going to have to disappoint Mr Vermillion and become more direct.”

Jason turned to face Kissling. Jason’s aura remained undetectable but his eyes were cold as they looked over Kissling like he was a slab of meat, hanging from hook.

“Mr Vermillion said that you were labouring under a misconception,” Jason said lightly. “In actuality, you are labouring under two.”

“And what is the second one?” Kissling asked.

“That he is protecting me from you. He is, in fact, protecting you from me.”

Vermillion winced.



“I could warn you about what would happen if you and your people took action against me or my uncle,” Jason continued, “but I realise that until someone is foolish enough to try, people aren’t going to take me seriously.”

“Do you really expect to intimidate me?” Kissling asked.

Jason let out a weary sigh, which he had to fake since he no longer needed to breathe.

“I see you’re one of those people who don’t listen so much as wait for their turn to speak,” Jason said. “When I came home, I wasn’t looking to go murdering anyone. I wanted things to be simple. I never want to kill people but in the end, the result is always killing and killing and killing. I think, at this point, I just have to accept that it’s inevitable. If it’s not you, it’ll be someone else.”

“I think we can try and find a middle ground,” Vermillion interjected. “Mr Kissling, your people are going to move in and take control of the local criminal element. I think we can all agree that this is an inexorable outcome. You, Mr Asano, want your uncle, and presumably his people, to be safe. Would you both consider that an accurate description of our current circumstances?”

“Yes,” Kissling said and Jason nodded.

“Good,” Vermillion said. “Then here is what I propose. The EOA will buy out Hiro Asano’s interests in the city, for extremely generous compensation. Any of Hiro Asano’s people will be free to leave unmolested or transition into the new administration as they choose. The Cabal will vouchsafe Hiro and his people from reprisals from Victor Tollman and his organisation or the Engineers of Ascension. This will remove any reason for you, Mr Asano, from intervening in Engineer of Ascension affairs. What do we think about that?”

“A chance for my uncle to go completely legitimate and come back to the family,” Jason mused, nodding thoughtfully to himself. “I like it.”

“I would need to have a better definition of Hiro Asano’s people,” Kissling said. “You could interpret that as the entire organisation he works for. Then, moving in at all would constitute breaking the deal and the Cabal is well within their rights to intervene under the guise of protection.”

“It will count Hiro himself and anyone who works for him directly,” Vermillion said. “It will include direct subordinates and low level staff in his legitimate business interests, that your people, Mr Kissling, would be assuming control of.”

“And your uncle will go quietly?” Kissling asked Jason.

“He already knows that things are changing in ways he doesn’t understand,” Jason said. “I’ll make sure he goes along. That does not mean he’ll turn against his former associates, however. He will not aid you against Tollman’s organisation.”

“We don’t need his help,” Kissling said. “We just need people like you to stay out of our way.”

“Deal,” Jason said, offering his hand over the table. Kissling shook it.

- 
- Michael Kissling
  - Elite Converted (bronze-rank)
- 

Jason schooled his face to not let the surprise show, but he spotted that Vermillion had noticed something. Kissling was nothing like the converted Jason had encountered in the astral space, at least to his magical senses. Kissling’s followers had the familiar, automaton-like presence, but they were of an entirely different nature, magically speaking.

These were clearly altered through methodology wholly unlike the modified clockwork cores the Builder cult employed. It would appear that the Engineers of Ascension had developed some alternate means to affect people in a similar way. As to how harmful that process was and if people were volunteering he would have to look into later. At the very least, Kissling seemed to have gone through the process with his mind intact.

After the deal was struck, Kissling turned to Vermillion.

“Will your organisation stand as guarantor for this compact?”

“It will,” Vermillion said. “We will take on the protection of Hiro Asano and his people, as well as enforce the other stipulations, should either party choose to contravene this agreement.”

“Very well,” Kissling said, standing up. “I’m glad we didn’t have to go through any unpleasantness.”

Vermillion and Jason also got to their feet.

“I would not consider your marching a small army of your drones through one of my places of business to be without unpleasantness,” Vermillion said. “Although you avoided anything drastic, do not expect this to go unanswered.”

Kissling frowned, but nodded his acknowledgement. He led his people downstairs and away, while Jason and Vermillion watched through the window.

“How long were you in action?” Vermillion asked.

“In action?” Jason asked.

“I’ve fought three wars,” Vermillion said. “One as a human, one otherwise and one half and half. I know what a man fresh from a life of constant battle looks like.”

“Half a year,” Jason said softly.

“Did you win?”

“Yeah. I had to die to get there, but we won.”

“You died?”

“I’m trying to give it up,” Jason said. “I’m worried that dying is becoming habit forming.”

“Habit forming?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Coming back from the dead is kind of my thing.”

“You are an odd man, Jason Asano.”

“You’re a vampire,” Jason said.

“It’s a good time to be a vampire,” Vermillion said. “Anne Rice, Twilight. Bram Stoker was a debacle for us, and the less said about Bela Lugosi the better.”

“Really? Twilight?”

“Twilight was fantastic for us.”

They watched Kissling and his people climb into a series of SUVs and drive off.

“So who do you think sent Kissling our way?” Jason asked. “Why did he approach here instead of the townhouse where I’m staying?”

“My guess would be that they were operating on very limited information.”

“The obvious culprit is our friend Victor,” Jason said. “If he can provoke the EOA into attacking you and me together, it draws two reluctant but powerful allies to his side.”

“Possibly,” Vermillion said, “but perhaps not probably. Victor likes to amplify his larrikin persona to make others underestimate him, but he is, in reality, both careful and deliberate. Setting the EOA on us would be a desperate gamble that could easily alienate the very people he’s trying to ally with. Desperate gambles aren’t the way he does things.”

“Maybe he’s desperate enough,” Jason said.

“I still think not,” Vermillion said. “Kissling won’t be a big shot in the EOA. If he wasn’t hungry to prove himself, he never would have risked this blowing up in his face. Whoever put him onto us most likely knew this and Victor lacks the knowledge of EOA members.”

“Then who?” Jason asked. “You think the Network has found out about a rogue new magician?”

“No,” Vermillion said. “That would be Annabeth Tilden’s call and she definitely isn’t stupid enough to provoke the Cabal like that.”

“Then who is?”

“Only low-level idiots with ambitions above their station, like Kissling. No, I think that whoever sent Kissling our way doesn’t fear the Cabal because they’re part of it.”

“Internal strife?”

“The Cabal is like an old, aristocratic family,” Vermillion said. “To outsiders, we present a united front. Within, however, is turmoil, ambition and backstabbing. We’re the most fractious of the three major factions because we have history enough that some internal squabbling always takes place within a broader context.”

“So, you think this wasn’t really about me,” Jason said. “You think it’s about you.”

“Most likely,” Vermillion said. “I’m afraid some of my fellows are eyeing you off as an opportunity to advance at my expense.”

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Two vampires met in a booth, in an upscale basement bar with old wood and dark lighting.

“Kissling was a disappointment,” one of them said. His clothes were as sleek as his youthful features and slick, dark hair.

“It was always less likely to work than not,” the other said. He looked to be a well-preserved middle age, with distinguished salt and pepper hair and a grey suit that complimented without being ostentatious. “I’m surprised Kissling even tried at all.”

“So what now?” the younger one asked. “Do we just let it go?”

“Of course not. If that essence magician really is an independent operator, that means there’s a source for new magic outside of Network channels. I’m not willing to let Vermillion take all the credit for bringing that into the Cabal.”

“Then what?”

“I think we need to see what this essence magician is capable of,” the older one said. “Let’s throw something at him and see how he handles it.”

“Like what?”

“The Blood Riders.”

The younger vampire looked askance at the elder.

“I think that is a very bad idea,” he said.

“The Blood Riders are being left to rot,” the older vampire said. “It doesn’t matter what happens to them.”

“My concern isn’t what happens to them,” the younger vampire said. “My concern is what they’ll do. They must be desperate after being cut off from their blood supply.”

“Which is why they’ll do what they’re told, if they think there’s a fresh supply on offer.”

“I don’t think they’re stable,” the younger one said. “Using them is courting disaster.”

Calmly and smoothly, so as not to alarm with sudden movement, the older one drew a pistol and shot the younger in the head.

“I just knew you’d be a tattletale.”

He put two bullets in the heart and two more in the head.

“That should hold you until I can find a saw.”

## Chapter 279

### Time to Rip Off the Band-Aid

“So, that’s the long and the short of it,” Jason said. “The EOA buy you out. Generously. I know it’s heavy-handed of me to take control of your affairs like this, but this is the only safe way out. It also means I can avoid killing a bunch of people.”

Jason and Hiro were in Hiro’s sprawling apartment. After Jason explained the arrangements he had made, Hiro spent a long time processing it in silence. Jason waited patiently.

“You’ve learned more about the EOA than before, haven’t you?” Hiro finally said.

“Yes,” Jason answered. “They aren’t something that Victor Tollman can resist. He just doesn’t have the tools. Unless people like Vermillion and myself choose to step in, and it would take more than just us.”

“At which point it wouldn’t be a matter of stopping someone from taking over but choosing who does,” Hiro reasoned.

“Yes. In any case, neither Vermillion nor I will be lending our assistance, let alone anyone else.”

Hiro absently rubbed a hand over his mouth as he continued to think things through.

“Did you ever happen to find out what EOA stands for?” Hiro asked.

“Engineers of Ascension,” Jason said.

“Sounds like a cult.”

“Not quite, but I sense a little bit of cult flavour,” Jason said. “I’ve had some experience with cults.”

“You’ve had experience with cults?”

“A couple,” Jason said. “One was the kind who live out in the desert and eat people. The other was more about your classic religious extremism.”

“Terrorists?”

“Basically, yeah.”

“I have to admit, I’m really curious about your time away,” Hiro said. “How did you get those scars, for example?”

Jason had two visible scars on his face, where fragments of star seed had pushed their way out of his body. The marks that experience left on his soul were now scars on his body. Mostly it was his chest, but he had a small scar on the side of his chin where his beard no longer grew in and one that bifurcated one eyebrow. They weren’t glaring blemishes, but they weren’t hidden, either.

"There was a local crime lord," Jason said.

"You told me you had a run in with someone like that."

"I did something he didn't like, so he had me kidnapped and handed over to someone rather unusual, knowing he would do worse to me than anything the crime lord could dream up."

"Were you...?"

"Tortured," Jason said. "To be honest, I was unconscious for most of it."

"Those aren't your only scars," Hiro realised.

"There might be one or two more. I got lucky, though. The bad guys had some kind of falling out. One of their henchmen did a runner and they were afraid he was going to tell people where I was."

"And they were right?"

"Yeah. Turns out the henchman tried to kill me once, but I let him live. He was apparently a live by a code type. So, while the bad guys were getting into it over what to do, I had a chance to get free."

"What happened to them?"

"I caught the crime lord and he caught the bad end of the barbaric local legal system. The torture guy got away, but he was way too big a deal for me to handle anyway. I did manage to scuttle some very big plans of his, later. A lot of his time, resources and people went down the drain. I still couldn't touch him, but I managed to hurt him some. It's a better chance than most get."

"I knew you'd been through some things," Hiro said.

"I'm looking forward to telling you more," Jason said. "Once you're out of the EOA's path, I'll be more comfortable about sharing some secrets. You aren't going to fight me on this deal, are you, Uncle?"

"No," Hiro said wearily. "Honestly, it's a relief. I've felt the changes coming for a while; I knew something was different about it. It feels like the pressure is constantly building and I'd like to get out before something blows up."

"I'm glad you feel that way," Jason said. "I'm just one man and I don't think I can protect you against a whole organisation. Even if I hadn't made this deal, I'd be stuck with the choice of leaving you defenceless or bringing even more of them down on you as they try to deal with me. I'm glad that Vermillion was there to broker it, because I'm still all sharp edges after too much fighting. Left to my own devices, I would have made things worse."

"I feel bad not standing by Victor, though," Hiro said. "He's been good to me."

“Vermillion and I are going to talk to Victor,” Jason said. “We won’t support him in resisting the inevitable, but we’ll back him up if we can convince him to facilitate a smooth transition. With us standing behind him, he can do very well out of this. As will you.”

“You’ll have a lot of capital and a lot of business experience,” Jason said. “I’m sure you’ll land on your feet. I’m hoping you’ll come up the coast with me. The family will be happy to have you out of your sordid life of hookers and blow.”

“Your entire understanding of crime comes from eighties action movies, doesn’t it?” Hiro chuckled.

“I’m learning,” Jason said defensively. “Just today I discovered that not all gang-bangers are white guys in torn leather vests.”

“I’ve actually been thinking about packing it all in for while,” Hiro said. “Heading up the coast, buying up some land and opening a resort. I know good contractors and how to wrangle a land deal. I have some connections that could really help me out. It’s an idea I’ve been playing with, ever since things started getting weird.”

“That’s a good plan,” Jason said.

“I don’t want to leave without settling things properly with Victor though,” Hiro said. “It feels like running away. I want to go with you, when you meet with him.”

Jason thought it over for a moment.

“Alright,” he said.

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Vermillion was wearing a blousy black shirt and painted-on jeans as he stumbled out of the backroom of a basement club he owned, with two pretty young women and one pretty young man. He made sure that they had biscuits and juice before arranging them all rides home. His aftercare was quite similar to the Red Cross following a blood donation. He was changing into clothes that he was willing to be seen in out on the street when something unusual appeared in front of him.

---

➤ You have received a voice chat request from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

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He glanced over at his phone, sitting on a dresser.

“That’s highly unusual. Er... accept?”

“Craig,” Jason’s voice came into his head. Vermillion had experienced telepathy before, although this was the first time it came with an operating system.

“Jason?”



“G’day. I’m going to bring my uncle along when we go see Victor, so can you swing by his place so we can all go together?”

“I know where it is,” Vermillion said. “That’s a good idea. Victor respects Hiro’s opinion, and knowing that Hiro has taken the out will make it easier for Victor to do the same.”

“Unless it backfires and Victor sees Hiro as a traitor,” Jason said, playing devil’s advocate.

“It’s worth the risk,” Vermillion said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

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Vermillion was back in tall, dark and mysterious mode when he arrived on Hiro’s balcony by means unknown. He was wearing a dark suit, his hair expertly groomed. Taika and Hiro did not notice his arrival until Jason opened the balcony door.

“Do you need an invitation, out of curiosity?” Jason asked.

“Only as a matter of manners.”

“Then, by all means, come in.”

Hiro and Taika were nervous, but Vermillion’s aura was toned down from the aggressive and intimidating norm he employed against his criminal associates. Both of the normal men had an expression of waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Shall we?” Jason asked, gesturing at the elevator. As they rode down, Taika kept glancing at Vermillion.

“How’d you get up on that balcony, bro?”

“Taika!” Hiro scolded.

“No, I’ve got to ask, boss. There’s some spooky stuff going on lately and I’m not sure I can protect you properly.”

“I respect your work ethic,” Vermillion complimented, “but a man in my position keeps his capabilities as secret as he can.”

Jason silently nodded his agreement. He had been very careful about using his portal arch because it was a powerful trump card, especially if no one knew that he had it. After testing to make sure it wasn’t impaired by the weak local magic, he had refrained from using it again, relying on Shade for transport.

Taika took the wheel of Hiro’s large town car, with Hiro next to him in the passenger seat. That left their backs to Vermillion in the rear with Jason. Although Vermillion’s aura was subdued, out of courtesy to Jason, he still maintained a certain level of unnerving pressure. He had an image to uphold, after all.

“Could we swap some aura manipulation tips later?” Jason asked quietly. He modulated his voice low enough that only enhanced senses would make it out clearly. “I’m pretty good at using my aura as a weapon, but I don’t have a lot of practice using it on regular people, so it’s bit of a blunt instrument. I appreciate the nuance of your fine control in projecting on normals.”

“I’d like that. I’d love to pick up some of your high-end control. It’s like an iron sphere.”

“Sounds good.”

“I have a club full of blood groupies who get off on aura manipulation. You’ll get all the practice you can handle.”

“Are they a bunch of emo kids?”

“Some,” Vermillion admitted. “There are all manner of thrill-seekers in my circle, though. Hedonism comes in many flavours.”

Hiro and Taika rode in silence, the unintelligible murmurings in the back making them all the more nervous. Then the murmuring stopped as Jason spoke out loud.

“What are those auras?” Jason asked. “I don’t recognise them.”

“What?” Taika asked.

“Just be ready to drive,” Jason told him.

“I am driving, bro.”

“I mean really drive.”

“What was that about auras?” Taika asked. “Are there crystal therapists coming after us?”

Vermillion let out a dark chuckle that chilled Hiro and Taika to the bone.

“You were going to tell them after the EOA deal was done, right?” he asked.

“Yeah, but I think it’s time to rip off the band-aid,” Jason said. “There’s at least two dozen of them, so I don’t think holding back will be an option.”

“Twenty-nine, by my count.”

“Twenty-nine what?” Hiro asked.

“Blood servants,” Vermillion explained. “People who have drank the blood of a vampire without going through the turning process.”

“Did you just say vampire?” Hiro asked.

“I don’t know about vampires or whatever,” Taika said as the car sped up, “but there’s a bunch of bikers riding up on us.”

In the thick traffic, it had taken Taika a while to notice the bikers converging on them. Although he had sensed their auras for a while, Vermillion now turned to look through the window.

“The Blood Riders,” he said. “They’re a motorcycle gang entirely turned into blood servants. My people forced the ones behind it to cut the bikers off. It seems that someone is trying to get some final work out of them before the strength leaves them.”

“Does that help us?” Jason asked.

“No,” Vermillion said. “Vampire blood is addictive, which is how vampires control their servants. Most likely, they were told that if they deal with us, their supply gets restored. They were probably told to be discrete, but blood servants get very focused when their supply is on the line. Once the effects start wearing off, they become aggressive and unstable.”

“Not so good at following directions,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Vermillion said. “I’d bet that whoever sent them hasn’t dealt with desperate blood servants before. They’re nice and obedient while the blood keeps coming, but they get very stroppy when it stops. Otherwise, they’d never come at us in the open like this. The Network is not going to be happy, however it plays out.”

“Uh, Jason,” Taika said. “There’s two more bikes.”

“More bikers?” Vermillion asked

“No, bro,” Taika said, sounding off-kilter as he watched the mirrors. “These look like your bike and the riders all look like they’re wearing a big, black coats or something.”

“Ah, my ride is here,” Jason said, then let out a gleeful laugh. “This is going to be wild.”

“Your ride?” Hiro asked, then goggled as Jason was shrouded in dark mist. At the same time, bullets started hitting the car.

## Chapter 280

### Bullets, Bikes and Blood

Hiro flinched as a bullet shattered the back window of the car.

"Is anyone hit?" he asked, ducking down as he turned to check on Jason and Vermillion in the back. Vermillion was rubbing the back of his head, looking disgruntled. In spite of the sudden chaos, Hiro was startled to see a figure draped in shadow where his nephew had been.

"Taika," Jason's voice came from the impenetrable darkness of the hood. "Keep driving and I'll do my best to keep them off you. Hiro, call the police."

"You seriously think the police can help?" Hiro asked incredulously.

"No, but a bunch of bikies attacked your car. You don't want to be the guy who didn't call the police."

"What do you mean, keep them off me?" Taika asked wildly.

The traffic along the multi-lane toll road had turned into chaos as the gunfire erupted from the bikers pulling out pistols and even sawn-off shotguns. Accidents were taking place already as cars swerved into one another in the mad panic to accelerate away. Some even wiped out the bikers that were the source of the chaos.

More bullets struck Hiro's car. Hiro hunkered down but that wasn't an option for the hefty Taika. Vermillion shifted position to shield the big man from the shots coming from behind. He winced when struck by gunfire, but while the non-magical bullets dug into his flesh, they were stopped dead by the strength of his bones. His vampiric regeneration pushed the bullets back out quickly, in any case.

Fortunately, firing a gun from a moving bike at a moving vehicle was not a recipe for pinpoint accuracy and more bullets hit random vehicles or nothing at all than Hiro's car. Even so, the sheer number of bikers firing off shots meant that both Vermillion and Jason were struck multiple times. Jason's cloak, however, shot out tendrils of shadow-stuff that intercepted the bullets, stopping them dead.

"Good thing they don't have magic bullets," Vermillion said.

"You can get magic bullets?" Jason asked.

"The Network can make them. I'm not sure how."

"Small mercies, then," Jason said. "I'm more curious about where they got that many hand guns. This is Australia."

"Left over from the smuggling ring that was shut down a few years back," Vermillion said. "They were having them sent from Austria to Sydney through the mail."

“How do you get hand guns through the mail?”

“I remember that,” Hiro said. He had pushed his seat right back and was doing his best to squeeze himself under the dash to make as small a profile as possible. “Victor rose up not long after that, after the cops busted the whole thing open. People appreciated someone who could keep a lid on things.”

The two big, black motorcycles and their shadowy riders pulled up on either side of Hiro’s car.

“Are you sure they’re with you, bro?” Taika asked nervously.

“Yep. I’m going to go do something about these bikies. Uncle Hiro, get right down.”

“Way ahead of you,” Hiro said in a voice shot with adrenaline and fear.

Two shadowy shapes moved away from Taika and Hiro as the bodies Shade had hidden in their shadows returned to Jason. Jason opened the door of the moving car and the two bodies slipped out to take the form of a third bike and shadowy rider, already on the move. That made three sleek, black motorcycles racing alongside the rapidly accelerating car.

Now six of Shade’s bodies were either bikes or riders, with the last being Jason’s own shadow. It rose up and engulfed him, Jason immediately emerging from one of the dark riders on the back of a bike. The rider diminished to form Jason’s new shadow as Jason took its place on the back of the bike. Under Shade’s control, the bike didn’t so much as waver during the process. Racing on the back of Shade’s motorcycle form, Jason’s cloak lit up with stars as it flared out behind him like the tail of a comet.

Jason had been a decent rider, once upon a time. As a boy, he had spent a lot of time riding on the farm of an uncle on his mother’s side. It had been a number of years since then and those were dirt bikes, as opposed to the powerful, oversized street bike form that Shade had assumed.

Riding on asphalt was easier than the rough dirt trails and loose sand he had experience with, but the wild traffic and gun-toting bikers were an exciting new hazard. Jason left the control mostly to Shade, broadly guiding his familiar by shifting his weight and leaving his hands free.

Two bikers rode up on either side of Jason, firing pistols. Despite the cloak largely trailing behind him, it still shot out tendrils to intercept bullets from all angles. The bikers were ostensibly out of reach, but Jason extended his shadow arms in each direction, grabbing the handlebars of each bike. He yanked them hard to the side, causing the front wheels of both to turn sharply. At speed, this caused both to flip immediately and Shade deftly slalomed between the tumbling bikes before swerving in the direction of more bikers.

Jason had used his clothes-changing ability to slip on his combat robes while he had still been in the car. Unlike scholarly robes, these were designed for combat, so while they were loose fitting, it was not so much they got tangled up in the wheels. The outfit custom-designed for him by Gilbert had sheaths across the chest for his throwing darts. They were incorporated directly into the custom armour, eschewing the need for the bandoleer he had used at iron rank.

Taking a dart marked with a green cord, he threw it into the wheel of an approaching motorcycle, which was immediately tangled in conjured vines, flipping over violently. Using a shadow arm, he jammed a red-tagged dart into the fuel tank of another bike, which exploded impressively.

Their auras told Jason that the bikies were at the low end of bronze, so they would likely survive a motorcycle crash. A motorcycle explosion, maybe not. He had not returned to his home world the same as he left and had no qualms about killing these men. If someone came after him, that was the life of an interdimensional man of mystery. Endangering others to get to him, though, was where he drew the line.

The traffic had started to clear, as accidents caused obstructions and lucky drivers managed to escape down exits from the toll road. As a results, the remaining cars were clear to accelerate to even more dangerous speeds, only to catch up with the traffic ahead, triggering a fresh round of chaos.

Jason's shadow again rose up into the form of a shadow rider and Jason vanished into it, emerging from another, bringing him closer to more bikers. He reached out with a shadow arm and punched a biker in the face before snatching his sawn-off shotgun. The disrupted bike crashed while Jason moved the shotgun into a firing grip in his hand.

He hadn't fired a shotgun since he was a teenager, again on his uncle's farm, but the cut-down double barrel wasn't a complicated weapon. Using Shade's superior mobility and control, he positioned himself to fire into the front wheel of one bokie then another, causing a pair of crashes before stowing the shotgun in his inventory.

After that, Jason started testing his abilities. He started with blood magic, which he knew to be effective at least against lesser vampires. He reasoned that blood servants should, if anything, have even less resistance.

*"Bleed for me."*

Jason's guess was borne out as a bokie started convulsing, blood spraying from his mouth and nose. He lost control of his speeding bike, which toppled over into a crash. For the next, Jason tried a different spell.

*"Feed me your sins."*

Jason was unsure if the vampire blood in the blood servants would count as an affliction, but suspected it might given Vermillion's description of the side effects. This proved to be the case as the biker's life force started bright red, with a dark red taint that was almost black that drained out and over into Jason's outstretched hand. Jason sensed the biker's aura drop from the low end of bronze, though iron and down to normal as it did.

The holy afflictions Jason's power left behind started inflicting transcendent damage with Jason's bronze-rank power on the suddenly normal-rank enemy. The biker's body lit up like a thermite reaction, cutting a trail of blinding light as his bike continued forward until it toppled over.

Jason didn't restrict himself to stealing guns and flinging spells. With a biker coming up behind him, Jason activated the gliding power of his cloak, the momentum lifting him up into the air off his bike. His own bike raced ahead as the biker appeared under him and Jason extended his shadow arms down to grab the handlebars, pulling himself down to land on the seat, behind the startled biker. He shoved the biker off and assumed control of the motorcycle.

Jason laughed like a madman, almost surprised the outlandish manoeuvre had worked. His bronze-ranked attributes had made it possible, the spatial awareness of his spirit and the agility of his speed attribute combining to superhuman effect. Momentarily clear of other bikers, he glanced forward to see how well he had distracted the bikers from his uncle's car. Most of them were now focused on him, although some were still in pursuit of the car.

Through the back window, he could see Vermillion, still body-blocking bullets for Taika in the driver's seat. Jason watched as a biker drew close to the rear of the car, at which point Jason sensed threads of magic emerging from the window, originating at the tips of Vermillion's fingers. They were invisible to the naked eye, but the magic imbued into the silken threads was clear to Jason, although clearly not the biker. They invisibly drifted around him with no reaction before going taught, slicing through flesh like a knife through vegetables. The bloody wreck that was the biker lost control of his bike, which toppled over to gruesome effect at the speed he was going.

Jason was forced to drive the ordinary motorcycle himself, recklessly pushing toward the closest surviving biker. He jumped up, standing on the bike in a dangerous balancing act briefly before leaping to the next biker, powerfully pushing off as he used the bike as a stepping stone before landing on another of Shade's bike forms. The disrupted biker wobbled dangerously and Jason swerved in to finish the job with a backhand to the face. The biker lost control and crashed, Shade expertly avoiding being caught up in it.

“We’re about to have eyes on us,” Shade warned from Jason’s shadow. Jason looked up to spot an approaching white helicopter bearing a news network logo.

“I guess I should tone down the magic,” Jason said, dimming his cloak down to black.

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Annabeth Tilden was eating lunch and playing go with her wife in the comfortable private lounge in the rear of her wife’s art gallery when her phone rang. They looked at the phone on the coffee table and saw it was the office.

“At least it isn’t two in the morning, this time,” Susan said.

“Keti, what is it?” Annabeth answered, her eyes going wide at the response. “What channel?”

She turned on the television. Soon she was watching coverage of a wild, running battle between motorcyclists on a Sydney toll road.

There was a swath of leather clad bikers on low-slung chopper-style motorcycles, many of whom were firing hand guns. Most eye catching was a man in black whose hooded cloak trailed through the air behind him, in constant threat of being dragged into the back wheel of his huge, black street cycle. There were flashes of gunfire, none of which phased the dark figure, as he rapidly dispatched the bikers by means hard to make out. The news camera seemed to have a hard time keeping the man in focus, but every time he swerved into the direction of a biker, the biker crashed spectacularly.

“Dear gods,” Susan said as the footage cross cut to the trail of crashed cars and bikes left in the rolling battle’s wake.

Annabeth took a long, steeling breath, the phone still held to her head.

“I’m coming right in,” she said over the phone.

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Even in a blood frenzy, the remaining bikers finally realised that their pursuit was futile. Jason likewise took off, flanked by the dark riders. He didn’t return to Hiro’s car under the gaze of the eye in the sky, instead opening up a voice chat with Vermillion.

“How are you?” Jason asked.

“These clothes are done for,” Vermillion said wearily. “The one I took to the head rang my bell pretty good. I really need someone to eat.”

“You mean something to eat,” Jason said.

“That’s what I said.”

“Can you deliver Taika and my uncle to the cops safely?” Jason asked.

“Of course,” Vermillion said. “I can liaise with the Network, who I imagine are spitting blood right now. I’ll have to face the music at some point anyway, given it was blood



servants that attacked us. They will be looking for an explanation from my organisation, since we're the ones with the blood servants."

"What will their attitude towards me be?" Jason asked.

"I have no idea," Vermillion said. "It probably depends on how much that news helicopter saw. I'll try and set up a meeting on neutral ground."

"That would be good," Jason said. "I owe you one for looking out for my uncle."

The helicopter continued to trail Jason and the dark riders until they moved under an overpass and didn't emerge out the other side.

## Chapter 281

### A Good Friend and a Very Bad Enemy

A sleep-deprived Annabeth Tilden was shotgunning coffee.

“More,” she demanded hoarsely as she finished, sending her assistant to replenish her supply. One of the side effects of being an essence user was an ability to resist the effects of caffeine, leading many coffee drinkers to ramp up their intake. This was bad enough at category one, but if she ascended to category two, coffee would no longer have any power to perk her up. As it was, she was adding stamina potion like a shot of whisky.

Annabeth was not in her office but in a conference room several floors down. Members of the Cabal were not just going to walk into the mystical defences of the top floor. She was slumped forward, elbows on the desk as she rubbed her temples, which did nothing to alleviate the stress headache.

The door opened to admit the Cabal representative, Vermillion. She had actually come to sympathise with the man over the course of the day, despite his organisation being the source of her current tribulations. Not only had he been caught up in it directly but also, like her, he had the highest-ranking members of his organisation dropping dissatisfaction onto him from a great height. Also like her, it was his job to somehow sort the whole mess out.

The footage had become an international news story. A violent gun battle on the streets of Sydney. A mysterious figure leaping from motorcycle to motorcycle amidst a hail of bullets, taking on a notorious biker gang by the dozen before vanishing without a trace. There were countless bizarre details, all of which were being overanalysed by media organisations around the world at that very moment.

Why did the rider seem impervious to bullets? Was their strange outfit some kind of body armour? What was the large, intimidating motorcycle they were riding? It was powerful, agile and did not conform to any model of bike that anyone could find, meaning it was either heavily modified or completely custom.

The only thing that barely salvaged the debacle was that while there were a lot of phone camera recordings coming out, on top of the news helicopter footage, barely a few seconds of clear footage was captured. Be it the news camera or the phone cameras of the people involved, none of them were able to focus correctly on the enigmatic rider as he dealt with the bikers one by one. Aside from a few scattered moments, every record had strange, unfocused distortion.

This made the few clear images that anyone had managed to capture get all the more attention. The strange spectacle of a biker seeming to spontaneously combust, burning up from the inside atop his bike had been posted online and picked up by the news.

Another short scrap of phone footage was causing particular problems. By the time the news helicopter started recording, the rider's cloak was black, trailing out behind him. Someone in one of the cars, though, had captured several seconds of the cloak lit up with shifting stars before their recording likewise became distorted. It was the only clear image of the rider, their unusual outfit and their unique bike. Most importantly, it was the only clear image of the rider trailing a comet tail of stars behind them.

The inevitable comparisons to Batman were something Annabeth could live with, since it muddied the waters. After the footage of the cloak of stars appeared online, though, the figure was dubbed the Starlight Rider by the media. Immediate comparisons were drawn to the stories of an angel made of stars from just a few days earlier, the incident that became known as the Sydney Children's Hospital Miracle. With the connection made between the SCH Miracle and the rolling gun fight, Annabeth's job was made all the harder.

Vermillion not only had to work with her to try and keep a lid on things, but bear the responsibility of the Blood Riders instigating the latest and most public debacle. As much as she hated her situation, she was glad not to be in his shoes. This whole affair could – and probably would – get her demoted. She had heard stories about the ways that the Cabal showed their displeasure, and while they were only rumours, she did not envy Vermillion, whatever the truth. Her sympathy for the man did not mean she would let up in getting what she needed from the Cabal, however.

“Well?” she demanded of him.

For his part, Vermillion was having as bad an afternoon as Annabeth. A figure from the murky reaches of the Cabal's upper levels had arrived to take charge, reducing Vermillion himself to a glorified message boy. It left him off the hook for cleaning up the huge mess, but also without a means to redeem himself after what happened under his watch. He would be held to account for the Network being handed the very last thing the Cabal wanted them to have: a justification to interfere with the Cabal's affairs.

“A delegation of my people have agreed to come in to answer for the Blood Riders,” Vermillion said.

“When?” Annabeth asked.

“Our own investigation is ongoing. You will have answers when we have answers to give.”

“And how long will this investigation take?” Annabeth asked.

“We are confident we know who did this,” Vermillion said. “They have already been taken in hand and we are confirming the details now.”

“That quickly?”

“It was not a grand scheme. It was the ambition of a fool who did not realise what they were setting in motion.”

“And how do I know that you aren’t just drumming up a scapegoat?”

“As you know,” Vermillion said, “we do not like outside influence in our affairs.”

“You have always been fastidious about handling internal affairs internally,” Annabeth acknowledged.

“In this instance, however, we recognise that our internal affairs have significantly impacted the Network’s core tenets. I’ve been told that we’ll be handing the perpetrator completely over to you.”

“Perpetrator, singular? You expect us to believe that one person is responsible for all of it?”

“The person in question did try to rope in an ally,” Vermillion said. “As best we can determine, this person immediately saw how wrong it would go and was killed for trying to interfere. You don’t have to take our word for it, though. You can use whatever means are at your disposal to get the truth from the man in question.”

“Any means? You’re truly giving him up instead of just a supervised interrogation?”

“Normally, we protect our own,” Vermillion said, “but this man has violated our own core tenets. No one is happy about how these events have gone. You will not be expected to show this person the courtesy you would otherwise extend to our members. How you question him and what to do with him when you’re done is up to you.”

“And if we choose to give him back?”

“That would be one of the crueller choices,” Vermillion said.

The decision had been made to cut out the cancer and leave it to the Network, in hope of avoiding more painful procedures down the line. The man in question was never a Cabal elite, instead a relative made into a vampire from compassion. Without being turned, he would have died from a fatal medical condition.

Annabeth was satisfied with the Cabal’s gesture, at least until she actually got her hands on the man in question to learn more. She turned the conversation to another topic.

“Why did you just let these blood servants keep running around?” she asked. “You had to understand that depriving them of blood would make them dangerous and volatile. I’m surprised your people didn’t kill them.”

“It was discussed,” Vermillion said. “In the end, it was Cabal members who approached the gang with promises and offers. Even if the members in question were far outside what would have been permitted if they hadn’t operated in secret, the Cabal was nonetheless responsible. Killing these men for becoming the thing we made them was ethically unsound.”

“You’re going to talk to me about mercy?” Annabeth asked. “Even disregarding the dead bikers, we have six civilian fatalities and we aren’t even done counting the injured. This disaster has been broadcast to every corner of the globe, on my watch. Everyone from the Steering Committee to the Network Council to the god damn Prime Minister has crawled up my arse and set up a ‘punch Anna in the colon’ booth. That’s what your mercy has done.”

“Some violent lashing out would not fall outside the expectations of a known criminal motorcycle gang,” Vermillion explained. “If not instigated to this, it would have remained contained. I was already in the process of arranging to have them arrested so they could go through the withdrawal period in custody, where they could be locked up without hurting anyone.”

“That didn’t really work out, did it?”

“No,” Vermillion conceded. “Unfortunately, I was overruled on who should administer the winding down of the Blood Rider project. The ones who started it all were placed in charge of closing it all down. It was meant to save face and be a lesson.”

“That seems like a recipe for disaster,” Annabeth said. “And now it’s been cooked up, and a disaster is what we got.”

“Quite,” Vermillion agreed.

“What about this rogue essence-magician?” Annabeth asked.

“He is not opposed to meeting you,” Vermillion said. “I had already advised him to seek you out prior to this affair.”

“Out of the kindness of your heart, I suppose.”

“A weapon you are not equipped to wield is at least as much a danger to you as to your enemy,” Vermillion said. “I don’t know where this man came from, but he’s a naked edge, fresh from battle. A well-sharpened edge, at that. He went through them like a chainsaw through butter. Thirty blood servants and I don’t think he even saw them as a

threat. I think he was testing out different ways to kill them, to see what worked. As it turns out, all of it did.”

“So, he’s a maniac.”

“I told you, Mrs Tilden, he’s fresh from some kind of battlefield. His instincts are still to react to any threat with definitive force.”

“You think being bloodthirsty gets him a pass?”

“I think that if we can help him rehabilitate, he’ll be a valuable ally,” Vermillion said. “If we forcefully suppress him, on the other hand, we’ll make a profoundly dangerous enemy. I suggest trying to understand him before taking action.”

“Well, if it’s understanding I need,” Annabeth said, “I think I know where to start.”

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In a police station, Vermillion and Annabeth watched Hiro from the next room, through the interrogation room security camera. Hiro’s body language revealed none of the turmoil they could both read in his aura. From the moment he arrived in the police station, Hiro had played confused victim flawlessly. Once he found himself in an interrogation room, he had asked for a lawyer and said not another word.

“Hiro Asano has not been inducted into the secrets of our world,” Vermillion said. “By your own rules, that makes him hands off.”

“I’ll acknowledge that if his nephew kept him in the dark like you said, that’s a good sign that the boy can act with decorum,” Annabeth conceded. “Will he continue to do so after today, though?” Annabeth asked. “He’s certainly going to tell his uncle, now.”

“Of course he will,” Vermillion said. “But Hiro hasn’t been told yet. Is today the day to play fast and loose with the rules?”

“There is such a thing as discretionary power, Mr Vermillion.”

“Mrs Tilden. You, like everyone else, saw this man’s nephew take apart a magically empowered gang of hardened bikers like they were a nice, crumbly cheddar. What you didn’t see and I did was how he reacted when that situation began. He wasn’t scared when they came on us. He wasn’t worried, or even concerned. He was excited.”

“He killed a dozen people.”

“Easily, and without hesitation. I would be very careful about how you treat his uncle.”

“You need to bring him to us,” Annabeth said.

“I told you that I’ve already agreed to set up a meeting. We can discuss the terms of that meeting now, if you like.”

“Terms? He can’t go running using magic to kill people on television. He comes to us or we go get him.”

“Despite the nature of his power, Mrs Tilden, he isn’t one of your people. Somehow he gained the power that only your people wield without learning of your organisation before I told him about it yesterday.”

“Do you think I care? Do you think that the people I answer to care?”

Vermillion turned his head from the viewing window to look at Annabeth, his face softening.

“Mrs Tilden. Anna. We’ve known each other for a number of years and have, I think, a good working relationship. As such, I hope you take this advice in the spirit it is given: Do not provoke Jason Asano. I’ve seen only a little of his power and a little of his mind, but it has been my experience that he treats kind with kind. Show him courtesy and you’ll receive it in turn. Come at him with force and you’ll be smeared across a highway on the news.”

“The Network is not a gang hopped up on vampire blood, Craig. If we decided to deal with him, there’s nothing he can do to stop us. Even if he’s inclined to stand against us, he won’t try once he realises the magnitude of what he’s up against.”

“Perhaps,” Vermillion said, “but I don’t think so. He may have the blood of the Japanese in his body, but he has the spirit of Ned Kelly in his soul.”

“Ned Kelly made a stand against the authorities, getting friends, family and innocent bystanders killed in the process.”

“And became a folk hero, none of which invalidates my point. In case it sways your decision, it is the official position of the Cabal that Jason Asano’s liberty and independence be respected.”

“How did you get your people to agree to that?”

“I convinced them that a favour today will pay dividends tomorrow. I strongly recommend that you take the same attitude.”

“If the Cabal thinks they can use him to establish their own branch of essence magicians, they’re in for disappointment.”

“That kind of ambition is above my pay grade, Mrs Tilden, but if that is their intention, then I’m confident that you’re correct. I’m simply of the opinion that Jason Asano will make a good friend and a very bad enemy.”

Annabeth gave a weary sigh.

“Do you know where he is now?”

## Chapter 282

### Flavour Text

The art gallery displayed no more signage than a plaque beside a nondescript door. It was the kind of place that if you didn't know it was there, then you weren't meant to. For many years, it had served as a money laundering operation for some of the Network's shadier revenue streams. Now that the government was secretly but wholeheartedly involved in the Network's activities, such clandestine operations were rarely necessary. The gallery was free to operate without dabbling in illegality.

Jason was strolling through, browsing the paintings. As he lingered in front of one, the gallery owner, Susan, approached. She was an elegant woman whom Jason judged to be in her late thirties or early forties. She cut an impressive figure of poise, grace and appealing but understated clothing choices.

"This is my wife's favourite piece," she said. "Is there something in particular that you're looking for?"

"I'm looking to make a very specific statement," he said.

"This piece is from Taverny's 'Seychelles Gothic' series, where he seeks to visually recontextualise the archipelago. This is a quintessential example of Taverny's use of framing and light contrast. If you told me what kind of statement you were looking to make, perhaps I could point you in the right direction. Only a fragment of the collection is on display, so I'm sure we can find something to fit your needs."

"My intention is to make a potent statement on the sanctity of family," he said. "I thought I would have more time to arrange things, but events are moving apace. Sadly, nuance must give way to blunt symbolism to make my position swift and explicit."

"I'm not sure that the Taverny sends that message," she said. "I have a number of works that touch on the theme of family and may interest you."

"It doesn't have to be depicted in the art," he said. "Show me something unconventional," he said. "Something whose very purchase makes it worthy of discussion."

Susan gave him an assessing look. His suit was sharp and flattering, but also slightly strange. The cut defied contemporary trends in tiny ways; a lapel angle here, a seam line there. The result gave the odd illusion of an arrow in flight. The man wearing it was young and Asian, probably mixed-race. His accent was Australian, clearly educated. He had sharp, handsome features and dark, penetrating eyes.

"I might have a work that interests you," she said. "I cannot guarantee I can sell it to you, however."



“Oh?”

“There is an unusual condition attached to this painting.”

Moving through to an office tucked discreetly into the rear of the gallery, he stopped dead still, eyes transfixed on a painting. It depicted four uniquely-stylised pillars situated between two planets, on a background of stars. The content arrested his attention, and while it had no trace of magic, something about it left him completely convinced that it was not the work of an ordinary artist.

“The most enigmatic piece in the collection,” Susan said. “The artist is new and critical reaction is split. Some find her subjects prosaic, while others find her brushwork almost hypnotically beautiful. The two works in our possession were sent to us only days ago, by the artist herself.”

“Who is she?”

“The artist is as mysterious as her art,” Susan said. “We know almost nothing about her, not even her full name. She simply goes by Dawn.”

“How much?” he asked.

“There is no price,” Susan said. “The artist gave me two paintings, on the condition that this one be hung and given to the person who can name the four pillars depicted within it. I can sell you the other, which is...”

“Jason, Colin, Gordon, Shade,” he said without hesitation, not taking his eyes from the painting.

Susan was a woman of composure, but flashed a startled expression.

“That’s right,” she said. “How did you know that?”

“Because I’m the subject. Show me the other painting.”

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Hiro and Taika walked out of the police station to find Vermillion waiting for them. They were nervous, but felt none of the bone-deep fear he normally induced. Since Jason had arrived, he had shown them nothing but politeness and respect, although he remained as mysterious as ever. Hiro spoke quietly to his lawyer, who quickly made himself scarce.

“Vermillion,” Hiro greeted. “Are you responsible for getting us out? I was worried once they put me in an interrogation room, but they let us out surprisingly quickly.”

“As far as the civil authorities are concerned, you were just one more victim trying to escape,” Vermillion said. “By the time anyone started recording the incident, the bikers were after your nephew and not us in the car. The lack of firearms or other contraband in your car saved many awkward questions and I barely had to step in to see things smoothly through.”

"I told you, boss," Taika said. "Not having guns will solve more problems than having them."

"As for less conventional authorities," Vermillion continued, "I have convinced them to leave you be, at least for the moment. It's Jason they want to speak to."

"Do you know where he is?" Hiro asked. "Is he alright?"

"He's fine," Vermillion said. "I've been keeping in contact with him via unconventional means, so he knows what's happening and he'll meet us shortly. For now, he's sending a car. The police are keeping yours, for the moment. Because of the bullet holes."

"Speaking of which," Taika said, "we need to have a talk about what happened. Why aren't you all shot up? What was that you were saying about vampires?"

Without Vermillion's aura pressing down on him, Taika's exasperation about the strangeness he was caught up in came out.

"Jason has asked that I help him explain everything to you, given that there are certain gaps in his knowledge base," Vermillion said. "There are still things to be done first, however. I've rescheduled the meeting with Victor Tollman; we'll be going there directly from here."

"Can't that wait?" Hiro asked.

"No," Vermillion said. "Today's events are a riptide, creating dangerous waters that you can't see unless you know what you're looking for. Jason wants you out of those waters as quickly as possible, and I want the same for Victor. He's become something of a friend and I believe you have the best chance of persuading him to get out of the water before he drowns."

A black town car pulled up on the street. It had sleek and aggressive lines; clearly a luxury car but not one Hiro recognised.

"This is Jason's car," Taika said, having ridden in this variant of Shade in the past.

Hiro didn't even recognise the manufacturer's badge on the front, even after stepping up to examine it. It looked like a starry sky with a floating cloak containing a daylight sky. It didn't belong to any car maker he was familiar with and he was familiar with most, at least at the high end.

He guessed that it was from one of the boutique companies that made short production runs of wildly overpriced custom cars. The license plate was in the thin, European style, white on black. He noticed the plate number, 5H4-D0W.

"Shadow?"

"What's that, boss?" Taika asked. "Oh, right; the plates. I noticed that too. The numbers for letters thing is a bit naff though, right? It's not 2004."

Vermillion got in the back with Hiro, while Taika took the passenger seat.

"There's no driver," Hiro said. He had heard about Jason's self-driving car, but it was still startling when the car pulled into traffic with no one in the driver's seat. "Are we sure this is safe? I've heard these self-driving systems can go wrong when faced with unexpected situations."

"I think you'll find," a voice came from the dashboard, "that this self-driving system is quite capable of handling any situation you can imagine, along with many that you cannot."

"Boss, the car is talking," Taika said. "It's like Team Knight Rider."

"Team Knight Rider?" Hiro asked.

"Yeah, Boss. It's the best one."

"It's really not," Hiro said.

"The best what?" Vermillion asked.

"It's a TV show about talking cars," Hiro said.

"I don't watch television," Vermillion said.

"Bro, you're missing out. You know, if someone told me last week I'd be talking to you about Team Knight Rider, I'd have said they were crazy. You're alright, bro. It's a bit weird that you think vampires are real, though."

"They are," Vermillion said.

"You know any vampires?" Taika asked.

"I am a vampire."

"The sun's out, bro. If you were vampire, you'd catch fire or blow up or something."

"It would be best, I think," Vermillion said, "to wait until Jason is with us before we get into explanations."

"This is too much," Hiro said. "A few hours ago, there were people shooting at us from motorcycles. Now we have talking cars and people claiming to be vampires? I need time to stop and sort all of this out in my head. I need some time and I need some answers, instead of a constant deluge of new questions."

The car stopped at traffic lights and Jason slipped into the driver seat.

"I'll do my best," he said.

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Annabeth managed to carve out a few minutes to call her wife.

"I'm probably not going to be home tonight," she told her.

"I knew that was coming when I saw the news," Susan said. "I bet the conspiracy theorists are all over it."

Annabeth groaned.

“You have no idea how annoying they are when they’re right,” she said.

“Well, it doesn’t match up to your day, but I had an interesting encounter of my own.”

“Oh?”

“You know that strange painting I told you about? Someone claimed it. He was a rather odd man. Very intense. He claimed to be the subject of the painting, even though there were no people in it.”

“Oh?” Annabeth asked, her instincts tingling. “Tell me about him.”

“His name is Jason Asano.”

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The car took off again as the light turned green. Jason was in the driver’s seat, but was leaving control to Shade.

“Uncle, Taika,” he greeted. “Thanks for looking out for them, Craig.”

“Craig?” Hiro asked, looking at Vermillion.

“Sorry, Vermillion,” Jason said. “I’ll keep it professional, yeah?”

“I think the mystique went out the window when we started talking about Team Knight Rider,” Vermillion said.

“Ick,” Jason said. “Why they kept trying to use Mustangs instead of a Trans-Am is beyond me. I’m certain that’s why all the follow ups failed.”

“Could we please stop talking about Knight Rider?” Hiro asked. “There’s something somehow even less plausible we need to discuss.”

“There is,” Jason acknowledged, the amusement gone from his voice. “Shade is taking us somewhere we can have a talk, given that what I have to tell you is the kind of thing that requires proof.”

“Shade?” Hiro asked.

“The car,” Jason said. “I’m assuming you were talking about Knight Rider because he spoke to you.”

“Jason, what’s going on?” Hiro asked.

“Well, you know those things I said I didn’t want to tell you about? It’s time to tell you about them.”

“Because of the people that attacked us?” Hiro asked.

“Yes,” Vermillion said. “The public nature of the attack has kicked the hornets’ nest. Although the attack didn’t involve the EOA, they’re going to approach things differently in the current climate. When they move in on Sydney’s underworld, they’ll be less tolerant of the resistance Victor is looking to put up. I want you to help me convince him that his efforts are futile.”

“At which point Vermillion will handle Victor’s next move, and I’ll see to your safety. For now, I’ll get you out of Sydney. Today. You too, Taika, now you’re caught up in this. We can organise the details of the handover to the EOA later. For now, I’ll explain what’s going on and then we’ll go see Victor.”

Vermillion’s phone rang and he pulled it out to check the caller.

“I have to take this,” he said, then answered the call.

“Mrs Tilden,” he greeted.

Annabeth’s voice came angrily through the phone without preamble. Jason’s bronze-rank hearing was easily able to make it out.

“Do you know where your friend Asano was while we had his uncle in custody?” she asked.

“He was laying low after what happened,” Vermillion said. “I would have thought you would appreciate that.”

“I don’t suppose you know where he was laying low.”

“I don’t,” Vermillion said.

“My wife’s art gallery! At the very moment you were convincing me to treat him respectfully, he was standing next to my wife.”

“Ah,” Vermillion said. “Jason, did you threaten my counterpart at the Network’s wife?”

“He’s there?” Annabeth asked. “Where are you?”

“Hand me the phone,” Jason said. Vermillion gave Jason an assessing look, then passed it forward.

“Mrs Tilden,” Jason said into the phone. “This is Jason Asano.”

“What do you hope to accomplish by threatening my family?”

“I’m not threatening anyone,” Jason said cheerfully. “Susan’s great, by the way; you did well there. I merely wanted to make it clear that while I don’t have the resources or personnel to protect my family from an organisation like yours, anyone who tries to use them as leverage will start a wave of reprisals that stains Sydney Harbour red with blood.”

Hiro and Taika looked on, wide-eyed as Jason cheerfully threatened to slaughter people’s families.

“You think it’s that easy?” Annabeth asked.

“Of course not,” Jason said. “When the time comes for us to meet, I simply want to avoid the tedium of explaining why trying to use my family against me is a Very Bad Idea.”

“Why are you treating us like an enemy, Mr Asano?”

“Because I’ve dealt with forces more powerful than myself before, Mrs Tilden. They have this habit of thinking they can get what they want from me without repercussions. Disabusing you of that notion now will be less costly for us both than doing so later.”

“Category two is powerful, Mr Asano, but we have stronger just here in Sydney, let alone around the country and the world. We’ve been building up for twice as long as this country has existed, and you think you can stand up to that with what you picked up in a year and a half?”

“Mrs Tilden, Australia has been inhabited for more than 60,000 years. It doesn’t impress me that your organisation has been around since before white people got here. I’ve faced an enemy more powerful than you can comprehend and it’s 2-1 in my favour. Your group isn’t a potential enemy, Mrs Tilden; you’re flavour text. If we can get along, maybe even do some work together, that’s great. But I don’t need you and I don’t fear you.”

“Are you quite done with the monologuing Mr Asano?” Annabeth asked.

“It felt good, I won’t lie,” Jason said. “Maybe I’m wrong and your organisation will spank me like a baby. You don’t want to test me and be wrong, though, Mrs Tilden.”

“You need to come in and talk to us about what happened today.”

“I really don’t, but I’ll let my new friend Craig set something up. In the meantime, I have some affairs to attend to, so I’m going to go. Congratulations on Bella getting the lead role in the play, though. That niece of yours is a real go-getter.”

Jason hung up the phone and handed it back to Vermillion.

“Can they track that?” Jason asked.

“No,” Vermillion said. “I thought you didn’t know anything about the Network.”

“I didn’t,” Jason said. “After I arrived, I did something to draw them out and started having their people followed. That was some good work, Shade. Nice and thorough.”

“Did you just threaten that person’s niece?” Hiro asked.

“I’m just keeping them from threatening my family,” Jason said. “I’m not going to hurt anyone else’s. It’s why I need to get you out of the EOA’s path. If they see you as a part of my family, rather than an independent obstacle, they won’t come after you.”

## Chapter 283

### Time For Context

Shade pulled into an underground parking structure where they wouldn't be seen and parked. Jason and Vermillion got out of the car, the others following suit. Hiro and Taika both looked stressed.

"I know things are coming thick and fast," Jason said. "It's overwhelming, but I'm afraid that there are miles to go before you sleep."

He looked at Vermillion.

"Have you ever done this before?" Jason asked.

"Inducted someone? I have, and it's rarely a smooth process. The gullible ones are the worst, because they'll believe in the supernatural nice and quick, but convincing them the supernatural stuff they already believe in is wrong can be tricky."

"Supernatural?" Hiro asked. "Are you going to tell us that you're a vampire too, Jason?"

"No, I'm more of a ninja warlock. I know how it sounds. Long story short: Magic is real, the soul is real, vampires are real. Lots of stuff is real. Werewolves?"

"Not in this country," Vermillion said. "There were some werecrocodiles, back before my time, but they were mostly wiped out during colonial days."

"No kidding," Jason said. "Anyway, magic is real, is the gist of it."

"This is some crazy stuff, bro," Taika said. "If you want us to believe magic is real, then you're going to have to show us some magic. Like, proper magic."

"That's why we're here. Shade, why don't you start?"

The car they were standing next to exploded in a mass of darkness that was drawn into Jason's shadow like he was sucking it with a vacuum cleaner.

"My car isn't a car," Jason said. "It's my friend Shade. Come out and say hello."

Shade's shadowy form rose up from Jason's shadow, taking on depth and substance while still being a figure of manifested darkness.

"It is nice to formally meet you," Shade said. Hiro and Taika glanced over from where they were waving their hands through the space the car had just been.

"I knew..." Hiro started, before trailing off. Jason waited patiently for him to continue.

"I knew there was something going on that went beyond normal understanding," Hiro said. "None of what I came up with seemed believable. Even seeing your car disappear, I mean... magic? Really?"

"It does seem pretty out there, bro," Taika added.

"I know," Jason said. "You need to see something truly impossible."

He waved his wand over the ground, creating a line of crawling darkness like black fire. At an upward gesture from Jason, an obsidian arch arose from the dark line, which itself moved up to fill the arch.

Hiro and Taika walked around it.

"I'd ask how you did that, but you're going to say magic, right?" Hiro asked.

"Yep," Jason said.

"What is it?" Taika asked.

"A door," Jason said.

"It doesn't go anywhere," Hiro said, shifting his gaze from one side of the portal arch to the other.

"If you step through, you'll see the truth," Jason said. "I'd call it a leap of faith, but faith isn't really my thing. So let's call it a step into a wider world."

"You want us to walk into that?" Taika asked.

"Yes," Jason said. "Think of it as your last chance to turn back. If you want, you can ignore everything I've just said. Go live a normal life and try not to think about it. Or, you can move forward."

"When you said you weren't going to tell me," Hiro said, "you said that one of the reasons was that I wasn't ready to face the dangers involved. What's changed?"

"I said I couldn't do it in a reasonable time frame," Jason said. "Once you're out of the EOA's path, we'll have the time."

"To do what?"

"To give you magic powers," Jason said.

"You can do that?" Vermillion asked. "Turn them into essence magicians?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "If it's something they want."

"What's an essence magician?" Hiro asked.

"Step through the arch and find out," Jason said.

"Boss," Taika said. "This whole thing is messed up. I'm just gonna go with it. See where it takes me."

"Taika!" Hiro called out as Taika stepped through the arch and vanished. He didn't even have to worry about fitting, as he did with most doors. The arch was large enough to accommodate even a leonid or a draconian, to which the mountainous Māori was actually comparable in size.

"Vermillion, would you check on him?" Jason asked.



“That’s a portal,” Vermillion said. “I’ve heard that some of your kind have them, but I’ve never actually seen one before.”

“Then this’ll be fun for you.”

Vermillion shook his head with a chuckle.

“Knowing you is an exciting lifestyle, Jason Asano.”

He shared a grin with Jason and stepped through.

“Jason, this is insane,” Hiro said. He was still walking around the archway, staring disbelievingly at the object that Taika and Vermillion had vanished into.

“Yep,” Jason agreed. “Just be lucky that you’re getting a nice, gentle introduction to magic.”

“This is gentle?” Hiro asked. “We were attacked by a bikie gang!”

“Just be glad no one tried to eat you. I’ll tell you about my introduction to magic later on. For now, it’s time to go. You aren’t going to leave Taika hanging, are you?”

As he said it, Taika came back through, looking around wildly, then throwing up.

“Holy crap, bro!”

He went back through the arch, vanishing again.

“See? No worries,” Jason laughed.

Giving Jason a trepidatious look, Hiro steeled himself and stepped through. Passing through the veil of darkness in the arch, he emerged atop a tall building in the CBD. Jason followed him through, to find Hiro also emptying his stomach. Vermillion was nearby looking peaky. Eventually Hiro recovered, wiping his mouth on a handkerchief.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“On top of Victor’s building,” Jason said.

Hiro looked at the arch, walking unsteadily around it.

“Can I go back, like Taika?”

“Go for it.”

Hiro went back through the arch, returning moments later and throwing up again. He staggered to the edge of the building, gripping the railing as he looked out at the city.

“This is crazy. It’s not possible.”

“That’s why I used magic,” Jason said. “Being impossible is kind of the point.”

“You said you’d give us magic,” Taika said. “Will we be able to do stuff like this?”

“Maybe,” Jason said. “There’s an element of randomness to what kind of powers you end up with.”

Jason turned to Vermillion.

“I’ve shown you one of my trump cards, here,” he said.

"I recognise that. You know I won't keep it a secret from my people, but I will remember that you were willing to share this."

"Consider it thanks for looking after my uncle," Jason said.

"There is one more thing," Vermillion said. "Victor."

"Yeah," Jason said. "Uncle Hiro, I know you just had your understanding of the nature of reality rewritten, but we have things to do. So, ask any questions you have now and I'll answer them. Once you've had time to process, you can go ahead and ask me some more."

Hiro rubbed his temples.

"I don't know where to start. How did you find out about magic?"

"I was in a magical accident."

"Your apartment."

"Yes. It sucked me into a magical alternate universe."

"What?" Hiro asked.

"You were serious?" Vermillion said.

"Bro, everything you say is weirder than the last. And the last thing was that magic is real. This is trippy."

"This is... I don't know what to ask," Hiro said.

"I do," Taika said. "You said we could get magic. How?"

"There is more potential power in your soul than you can imagine," Jason said. "I can use objects to unlock that potential."

"Is that where your power comes from?" Hiro asked.

"Yes."

"Will our powers be like yours?" Taika asked.

"No," Jason said. "I don't have the right items to give you powers like mine, but you don't want them. I'm very specialised."

"In what?" Hiro asked.

"Things best explained when I have time for context," Jason said.

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"I'm not going to lie," Victor said. "This feels like a betrayal."

With Vermillion, Jason, Hiro and Taika lined up in front of him in his office, it had the feel of a confrontation.

"Victor," Vermillion said. "Things in my world just got a lot more complicated. If you don't let me negotiate a way out for you, things will end badly."

"So now you're spruiking for the EOA?" Victor asked.

“No, Victor,” Vermillion said. “I don’t need to. No one who can stop them is willing to stand in their way, and any support you might have been able to wrangle has gone now.”

“Because of that rolling fight on the news?” Victor asked.

“Yes. The people who keep that kind of thing off the news are on the warpath. Everyone else is hunkering down until the storm passes.”

“And I’m the one who suffers.”

“Victor,” Hiro said. “The things I’ve seen today. If that’s what’s coming for you, there’s no stopping it.”

Victor’s gaze panned from Hiro to Vermillion.

“He knows?” Victor asked. Vermillion nodded.

“How much?” Victor followed up. “Did you tell him more than you’ve told me? What happened to needing dispensation from your people?”

“I was the one who told my uncle, Victor,” Jason said coldly. “I don’t belong to Vermillion’s group. If you have a problem with that, you can take it up with me. I’m here because Vermillion and Hiro don’t want you in the path of what’s coming. I don’t care if the EOA bury you, so long as my uncle is well out of it.”

Victor paced back and forth, angrily rubbing his forehead.

“You’re telling me I have no recourse, but won’t tell me why. You realise that sounds like you’re feeding me a line, right?”

Jason sighed.

“Gordon,” he murmured.

A cluster of darkness appeared, shifting into the form of a cloak, within which a nebula of orange and blue light lit up in the shape of an eye. Around it, four spheres, likewise in the form of glowing eyes, slowly floated around it.

The others in the room were all wide-eyed at the sudden manifestation of the familiar. The floating cloak-entity was unmistakably alien and unfathomable, seeming to contain mysterious depths.

“This is my friend,” Jason said. “Notice that he contains what looks a lot like the Helix Nebula. The one they call the Eye of God. I won’t show you what he can do because it would be rather destructive.”

Jason gestured with his hand and Gordon vanished again. Hiro, Taika, Victor and Vermillion were all staring at the space it had just occupied.

“I speak from experience when I tell you that standing up to vastly more powerful forces comes with a price. If you’re willing to pay that price, then I won’t stop you. But if you try, expect to fail. You pay the price either way. Vermillion can’t tell you, Victor, but I

can. There are forces out there far more powerful than you know, and sooner or later, the world is going to find that out. You have three options here. One, fight and die. Two, take the money and run. Grab everything you can and get to high ground before the wave hits. Three, throw your lot in with the EOA. If you want to go deeper into the world you've only caught glimpses of, they're the only one's who can offer that."

"I think you've said everything you can," Vermillion told Jason and Hiro. "Leave me with Victor, for now. Mr Asano, I'll contact you to sort out the specifics of your own arrangements with the EOA."

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"How long will it take you to put your affairs in order?" Jason asked Hiro. They were driving back to Hiro's apartment building, once again in the care of Shade's car form. Taika and Hiro had shown some hesitancy about it when the car appeared from a swirling mass of darkness, but they had, after all, ridden in it before. Jason was in the driver seat, with Hiro and Taika in the spacious and comfortable rear.

"I keep my business under careful control," Hiro said. "If they are really going to come in and take over, the actual logistics are simple, just a matter of business transfers."

"You'll be fairly compensated for everything," Jason said, "or they'll find my next negotiating position to be significantly more aggressive."

Hiro and Taika shared a glance at the sinister expression on Jason's face.

"My real concern is my people," Hiro said.

"I made it clear that they were to be treated well," Jason said. "Whether they want to stay under the new management or move on, they'll be taken care of."

"It won't be just a matter of signing some papers and walking away," Hiro said. "I need to speak to my people; explain the transition to them in person. Even if I get out of Sydney, I'll need to make repeated trips back to go through it all."

"That's fine," Jason said. "You just need to get the ball rolling well enough that we can leave town for the moment."

"I can get the administrative affairs ready today and take tomorrow to talk to my people. I can be ready to go the day after."

"Alright," Jason said. "I need to deal with the ramifications of today's excitement. We leave in the morning, the day after tomorrow."

## Chapter 284

### Brown Trousers Time

Jason was perched on a rooftop, looking at his uncle's town house from across the street. Shade appeared next to him.

"Find anyone else?" Jason asked.

"No," Shade said. "Just the one iron-ranker inside."

"Meaning that that he's either alone, or whoever else they sent is powerful and capable enough to escape our senses."

Jason had no intention of staying in the town house under current circumstances, but wanted to retrieve his mana lamps if possible.

"I only spotted one silver-ranker during my investigation of the Network's personnel," Shade said. "Her aura control was insufficient to avoid my detection."

"It's the ones who can escape your senses we need to worry about," Jason said.

"I agree," Shade said. "I would recommend either having me go, or sending Taika."

Although incorporeal, Shade's bronze-rank vessel could exert enough physical force to manipulate objects. He could also store limited amounts in his own dimensional storage space.

"You go," Jason said. "I can use you as a conduit to talk to whoever's in there. It's possible they sent an iron-ranker in the open to show they want to talk without applying pressure."

"The influence of Mr Vermillion?" Shade posited.

"Or wariness. They don't know what I can do."

"I don't think finding out will make them any less cautious," Shade said.

"No," Jason chuckled. "Probably not."

Shade sent one of his bodies into the townhouse, silently collecting the mana lamps. The iron-ranker didn't sense Shade, but noticed the change as the lamps stopped absorbing ambient magic. Standing in the middle of the townhouse, he looked around. Suddenly there was a shadowy figure that hadn't been there a moment earlier.

"Did the network send you?" Jason asked, speaking through Shade. There was no friendliness in the cold flint of his voice.

"Yes," the man said, looking over Shade. "Am I addressing Mr Asano?"

"Yes."

"My name is Michael Aram. Annabeth Tilden asked me to speak with you. We didn't think you were likely to come back here, but hoped you might."

"I came to retrieve something I left behind."

"I did notice a change in the magic. May I ask what that was?"

"Mana lamps," Jason said. "Is that a thing you have here?"

"We do," Aram said. "So, you really did... go over there. The other world."

"What do you know of other worlds?" Jason asked.

"Wait, worlds plural?"

"Not that much then. What do you want, Michael Aram?"

"Mrs Tilden asked me to open a dialogue. If you really are an outworlder, you no doubt acquired knowledge and resources along the way that would be of immense value to us. We, in turn are essential to you."

"Is that so?"

"We are the only source of monster cores."

Jason let out a murderous chuckle.

"You think I need monster cores?"

"If you want to get stronger."

"I don't need cores to get stronger, just sufficiently powerful enemies to fight. Which means I might have some use for your organisation, even if you don't like I do with it."

"You've only been gone a year and a half," Aram said. "How can you have gotten as strong as you have just from fighting? We have a member who refuses to consume cores, and it's taken him eight years to reach category two. Since then, he's been bottlenecked."

"You really do need what I know, don't you?" Jason asked, his voice becoming more relaxed. "There are things you can help me with, and I am inclined toward collaboration. My concern is that your organisation will try to hold me upside down and shake all the goodies out. I'm not going to just waltz into that spider's nest of enchantments on your headquarters, without a care in the... what the...?"

The shadowy figure of Shade's body dashed away, leaving Aram alone.

"Mr Asano?"

\*\*\*

Jason was kneeling on the sloped roof with his eyes closed, channelling his sight and voice through Shade as he conversed with Aram. With his heightened senses and ability to sense both auras and magic he was far from oblivious to his surroundings, but he only sensed the attack at the last moment. It came fast and seemingly out of nowhere, Jason only detecting it as an aura bore down on him, trying to shock him with silver-rank suppressive force.

It was almost the exact same manner as the last time he was attacked out of nowhere by a silver ranker, but Jason was a very different person from the time he was kidnapped. The attacking aura smashed into the iron shell that was Jason's own aura and rebounded, giving Jason a warning instead of freezing him in place.

Even so, Jason's silver-rank attacker was faster than him and already moving as he reacted. He managed to avoid the hand reaching for his head, but was unable to avoid it gripping his shoulder.

- 
- You have been attacked. Attacker has been afflicted with [Sin].
  
  - Special attack [Dark Slumber] has inflicted [Sopor Toxin] on you.
  - You have resisted [Sopor Toxin].
  - [Sopor Toxin] does not take effect.
  - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
  - You have gained an instance of [Integrity].
  
  - Special attack [Dark Slumber] has inflicted [Vulnerable] on you.
  - An instance of [Resistant] has been consumed to negate [Vulnerable].
  
  - Special attack [Dark Slumber] has inflicted [Sluggish] on you.
  - You have resisted [Sluggish].
  - [Sluggish] does not take effect.
  - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
  - You have gained an instance of [Integrity].

---

Jason's affliction specialisation paid off against the special attack. His stacked resistance effects and ability to ignore rank disparity allowed him to resist two of the three afflictions and negate the third.

He reacted instantly, slipping free of the hand and dropping off the nearby roof edge, not even bothering to take a moment to look at his attacker. His cloak formed around him as he dropped, but he didn't reduce his weight to slow the fall. Instead, he formed a shadow arm and used it to grip the roof as he dropped, letting it stretch out before using it to spring back upwards. He sprung back over the rooftop just as his attacker peered over the edge. The attacker caught a raking slice across the torso from Jason's conjured dagger, stumbling back as Jason landed lightly on the rooftop.

- 
- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Network Assassin].
  - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Price of Absolution] on [Network Assassin].
  
  - Weapon [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation] has inflicted [Ruin of the Flesh] on [Network Assassin].

- Weapon [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation] has inflicted [Ruin of the Blood] on [Network Assassin].
  - Weapon [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation] has inflicted [Ruin of the Spirit] on [Network Assassin].
  - [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has bestowed five instances of [Guardian's Blessing] on you.
- 

Jason alighted back on the rooftop, his cloak floating around him. He eyed off his opponent, satisfied at the silver ranker's failure to resist even a single affliction. His ability didn't give him a name even after coming into contact with the man. His ability to extract information was hampered by the enemy's superior rank, although the more generic label of Network Assassin told him a lot, too. Just as Landemere Vane had been described by his power as a Builder Cultist, knowing their affiliation could be more useful than a name.

The silver-ranker looked around thirty, but there was no telling with an essence user. He had short-cropped hair and black, paramilitary attire. His tactical armour wasn't magical, easily sliced through by Jason's dagger.

The man glanced down at the wound on his chest and back up at Jason. He looked startled that his silver-rank flesh had posed little more resistance than his non-magical armour.

"You should come with me, Asano. We want to work with you, not force you into anything."

"I could tell from the way you sneak-attacked me on a rooftop," Jason said. The man had a slight French accent, but that could have been a ruse. If Jason was a German assassin, he'd probably fake a French accent too.

"I don't have time to convince you. We couldn't take the chance you'll say no. Don't do this the hard way."

"You don't know me, but the hard way is kind of my thing."

"It isn't a question of whether you get away, Asano. It's a matter of how much you get hurt coming with me."

"Pain I can handle. *Your fate is to suffer.*"

- 
- Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Network Assassin].
  - Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inescapable] on [Network Assassin].
  - [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has bestowed two instances of [Guardian's Blessing] on you.
-



“The hard way it is,” the man said, holding up his hands to conjure knuckledusters on each hand, with three sharp tines sticking out of each. He leapt into the attack as mirror images appeared around him, all springing on Jason.

Jason lifted up his hand, which was oozing blood from the palm. A cone of leeches sprayed out over the images. Most passed through illusory doubles, including one in the position of the original body. His attacker’s real body staggered back as leeches clamped onto it, while the rest of the leeches were scattered across the roof by the spray.

- 
- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Network Assassin].
  - [Bleeding] already in effect, [Bleeding] is refreshed.
  - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Network Assassin].
  - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Network Assassin].
  - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Network Assassin].
  - [Bleeding] already in effect, [Bleeding] is refreshed.
  - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Network Assassin].
  - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Network Assassin].
- 

Jason regretted that Colin didn’t trigger his amulet, but he was satisfied enough with his familiar’s storm of afflictions. Jason was a true affliction specialist now, able to lay on plenty of afflictions himself.

The enemy was only briefly startled and didn’t bother futilely plucking at the leeches easily biting through his clothes. He didn’t fail to notice Gordon manifest into being and nimbly dodged the four beams of energy firing at him from Gordon’s floating eyes.

The assassin jumped back while throwing out his hands and his own swarm of creatures appeared. Tiny, metal hummingbirds with long needles for heads, they buzzed with the flapping of their tiny metal wings as they darting out, spreading out to engulf Jason.

“Gordon,” Jason said calmly. Two of the familiar’s orbs launched forward, coming together just as they met the swarm. The resulting explosion of resonating-force annihilated the metal creatures, although many of the leeches scattered over the roof were likewise eliminated.

The assassin used the explosion to mask another special attack, with a storm of needles raining on Jason. His cloak intercepted the projectiles, but their silver rank power still pushed through more often than not. Their damage was diminished, however, and by the time they chewed through the Guardian’s Blessings, the damage was minimal.

- 
- An instance of [Guardian's Blessing] has been consumed to absorb damage. [Guardian's Blessing] has bestowed [Blessing's Bounty] on you.
- 

Even that damage was quickly repaired by the ongoing healing effects of the Integrity buff, which continually replenished his health, stamina and mana, along with the healing of the Guardian's Blessing. The needle storm was never intended to be the real threat, however, just keeping Jason off balance to set up the assassin lunging in with his claw-like weapons.

Sophie would have been more than a match for the silver-ranker, in speed and skill both. As it was, the silver ranker had the clear edge in speed, while Jason's experience and technique were clearly dominant. Month after month, day after day and even hour after hour of battle in the astral space had sharpened Jason's skills to a razor's edge.

When he first started training, he had naïve ideas about being some kind of perfect counter-attacker. Then, the practical realities of combat slowly pounded into his head that he was not an anime character. Training with Rufus and Sophie, then battle after battle after battle had allowed him to refine that original idea into a more practical form.

Jason and Sophie practiced the same, highly versatile combat style, but they did so in different ways. Sophie used the versatility to constantly dominate, adapting her attacks into what was worst for her opponent at any given moment. It was her style before gaining powers, which only enhanced its effectiveness by piling on speed and mobility.

Jason likewise moulded his approach to his powers. With his cloak and his stretching arms, his approach leaned heavily on deception. Hiding unconventional movement and posture behind his abilities, he was hard to pin down and full of unpredictable attacks. The fact that he rarely went for more than superficial wounds with his daggers also opened up a world of attacks that others would find inconsequential.

Jason used all this to full effect against the assassin. Leaping between Shade's bodies, masking his posture and movements behind his voluminous cloak. Reaching out with his shadow arms to make attacks that shouldn't be possible.

Jason dominated the fight. Despite the assassin's advantage in speed, his claw weapons never landed on Jason, even getting caught up in the cloak, which Jason used to yank him off balance. When the assassin tried to yank the cloak back, it passed through his fingers, insubstantial.

This did not mean that Jason was relaxed. He was fully aware of the power disparity and knew that only a handful of blows from the silver-ranker would breach the protection of his amulet and take him down.

The assassin continued to strike out literally and figuratively, hitting air as his attacks passed through the cloak. Jason's body was never exactly where it seemed, and every failed attack was followed up with a counter attack. Realising he was outclassed, the assassin tried to back up and regroup his thoughts. Jason didn't allow it, moving onto the offensive.

Every moment that ticked by was gold for Jason as his afflictions became more and more entrenched on the enemy. Likewise, Gordon was lashing out with two beams from his remaining eye orbs, although the disruptive-force damage was specialised against magic, adding only minimal damage to the silver-ranker. If Gordon didn't share Jason's power to ignore rank disparity as Jason's familiar, the damage would have been almost ignorable.

Eventually, the assassin became aggravated at Gordon, throwing out a stream of shimmering force needles that managed to harm the incorporeal familiar. Jason had Gordon unmanifest, returned to Jason to bolster his aura strength. Neither Jason nor the silver-ranker could suppress one another despite an ongoing struggle, so they were each affected by the other's aura. In this, Jason had the advantage, as his aura seemed to take full effect. The assassin's aura inflicted a weakening debuff that Jason's continually resisted, actually making him stronger.

Although he had seen it before, Jason was still amazed at the resilience of a silver-ranker. His opponent was fighting through what would have killed the most resilient bronze-rank anything long ago. The man looked almost undead under the ravages of Jason's necrotic damage.

Jason had more skill, not just with his combat skills but also in the tactical use of his abilities, outplaying one power after another despite his own being lower rank. The assassin, like most humans, was heavy on special attacks, and Jason was unsure if he was holding back the more dangerous ones. The idea seemed to be capture, rather than kill, after all.

Ultimately Jason was not Sophie. Stand-up fights were where she excelled, while he was all about making the most of complex environments. The rooftop on which they fought offered nothing more than a slight slant, the open space very much to his disadvantage. If not for Shade's bodies spread over it for shadow jumping, the fight would have gone far worse.

His original plan had been to turn the fight into a chase. Drown his opponent in afflictions, then make for more complex environments as they did their work.

Unfortunately, not all of the assassin's powers were effectively handled by Jason, with one making his plan unworkable.

The most effective power the assassin employed was a tether power, much like that used by Belinda. It did not impede him as long as he remained close, but trying to leave the rooftop brought about dangerously escalating damage. The tether even tracked him through teleports and he wasn't willing to risk a portal.

If the power managed to follow him, that kind of distance would cause the tether to kill him instantly. He knew that it would be possible to destroy the conjured rod to which the tether was affixed, but he also knew that would likely cause a powerful explosion. He would mostly likely survive the silver-rank blast, but it would hit him hard enough that the silver-ranker would have a chance to end the fight.

Jason was willing to stick out the fight, as his position improved with every passing moment. He was accumulating power while his opponent accumulated afflictions. Crucially, this included an affliction from his Hand of the Reaper power that simultaneously chipped away at the assassin's speed advantage and ability to hold off his afflictions.

- 
- **[Rigor Mortis] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Penalty to the [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Each time a new instance is inflicted, deals necrotic damage for each existing instance.**
- 

Jason was satisfied with how the fight was progressing. The silver-ranker was a monster core user, with the typical weaknesses that entailed. Rufus had long ago explained that without being forced to use all their abilities in order to advance, monster core users tended to develop certain flaws.

One was that they weren't as intimately familiar with their powers as someone better trained, using them less effectively and often more as an addendum to their combat instead of an integrated aspect. The big one was they developed a habit of using whatever subset of their powers had proven the most useful early in their careers, often ignoring the others and missing out on the powerful synergies of a comprehensive power set.

Jason, by contrast, had used almost every power in his repertoire, from using his perception power to observe the magic of special attacks and dodge them through his array of afflictions to his familiars.

His only regret was that he had been forced to blow up much of Colin's leech supply before the apocalypse beast could have a definitive impact. Colin was normally Jason's strongest weapon, but he didn't regret the explosive attack, however. He'd seen the effects of a swarm attack too often to underestimate one from a silver-ranker.

Jason had forced the assassin into a race against time; silver-rank speed and endurance against circumstances that were turning the fight further and further against him with every passing moment. Even when he managed to land an occasional hit on Jason, the afflictions were multiplying so much on the assassin that his amulet quickly replenished the shields.

Jason used his Punition spell for a burst of damage, harming the assassin further for each of the afflictions on him. Then Jason drained the afflictions away with Feast of Absolution and leaving a brutal mess of holy afflictions in their place. The assassin felt the power burning away at his insides and saw the light shining from under his skin.

Knowing that his one advantage over Jason was the raw power of his rank, the assassin bet everything on a last-ditch, desperation move. He had hoped that Jason would be stupid enough to smash the tether rod, but he hadn't. Betting his own resilience, battered though it was, the assassin smashed the rod himself. The resulting blast unleashed a shockwave that sent both Jason and the assassin tumbling off the roof and down to the street below.

The assassin realised that his gamble had paid off as he was the first to recover and push his way painfully upright. Despite the ravaging power still coursing through him and all the shields and healing Jason had put up, the sheer superhuman fortitude of a silver-ranker was that remarkable.

That was not to say that Jason wasn't recovering quickly. He was, by that point, drenched in ongoing healing effects from the afflictions he absorbed and the power of his amulet. The assassin wasted no time, reconjuring his fist weapons without spikes before leaping on Jason and brutally wailing into his head, relying on the obvious healing Jason was getting to keep him alive.

As for keeping himself alive, the assassin pulled out a cleansing potion worth more than most cars and tipped it down his throat. His possession of two such potions was what had kept him from abandoning the fight as Jason layered affliction after affliction on him.

To the assassin's horror, the potion he expected to wash away everything Jason had done like a cleansing flood only partially eliminated the afflictions. The terrifying light continued to glow under his skin, even if it was greatly diminished. He wouldn't be able to take the other cleansing potion immediately and drank a powerful healing potion to keep himself alive.

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Aram had recorded almost all but the earliest moments of the fight on his phone. At a far remove, neither his aura nor his non-magical recording device had been spotted. He

had been watching in disbelief as Asano fought not just evenly but at an advantage against a category three, their ranks clear to Aram as he felt their powerful auras clash. The category three looked to be on his last legs when he blasted them both off the roof, his superior endurance turning the tide as both men were hit hard. The category three recovered faster and brutally attacking Asano.

He watched the man take a potion, which diminished the eerie glow coming from within his body, followed by another that partially healed the man's ravaged body. Even after, the man looked less like a living being and more like a glowing zombie. As he was taking the potions, three men pulled up in a pair of cars. Clearly they knew the man, who yelled a series of angry instructions, although Aram was too far away to make them out.

The man jumped into one of the cars and tore off at speed, leaving the three men behind. Aram wanted to step in, but the three men were all category twos. He couldn't handle one, let alone all three. He watched them inject the contents of a huge syringe into Asano before placing a collar around his neck and bundling him into the boot of the remaining car before taking off in a different direction to the man that had fought Asano.

Aram sent the video file to Annabeth and then immediately called her.

"How did it go?" she asked, not bothering with a greeting.

"Ma'am, check the file I just sent you," Aram said gravely. "I think it might be brown trousers time."

## Chapter 285

### The Complete Set

“Look at the way he moves,” said Nigel, the combat instructor of the Network’s Sydney branch. “That fighting style isn’t an extension of ordinary martial arts.”

A cluster of Network analysts and investigators were watching the footage Aram had captured of Asano’s rooftop fight. They had already seen it three times.

“It looks like stage combat,” Ketevan said. “Like the whole thing was choreographed.”

“His fighting style is designed from the ground up to incorporate superhuman capabilities and supernatural powers,” Nigel assessed. “I don’t think he learned that on our world.”

“You think this supports the outworlder theory?” Aram asked.

“I do,” Nigel said. “The category three is completely outclassed in terms of skill. He only won because of the vast gulf in power between categories two and three. Trying to jump categories at that level is dancing on a knife edge. When facing that kind of strength alone, you can’t make any slip ups. Let them outpace you, you’re done. Fail to counter one ability, to anticipate one move and you probably won’t get a second chance. Asano made one mistake and that was all it took to turn the tables, because a category three’s bare hands are stronger than most special attacks.”

“Alright, that’s enough,” Annabeth said as the footage finished again. “Nigel, work with the analysts, get me anything and everything from that footage I can use. Aram, get me an update on the search for that car. Ketj, with me.”

Annabeth marched out of the room, Ketevan in tow.

“Ketj,” she said wearily, “update me on the biker siege.”

“The police standoff with the survivors of the tollway fight is ongoing. Media presence is exactly as bad as we projected. We’re coordinating with the Cabal on resolving the outcome. Mr Vermillion has assured us that the bikers are all going to have a violent drug reaction and die very shortly, including the ones in police and medical custody.”

Annabeth took a short moment to play out the scenario in her mind.

“The story will be an undirected, mass reaction to a bad batch of drugs leading to tragic and violent outbursts,” she said thoughtfully. “We can work with that. It’ll play well with the conservative crowd; let them distract everyone with a crackdown on drug enforcement.”

“Mr Vermillion wanted to express that the Cabal takes responsibility for the problem. He also wanted to know where Jason Asano was.”

“Don’t we all. What about this vampire they claim is responsible for unleashing the Blood Riders. Are they any closer to handing him over?”

“Mr Vermillion says it will be by the end of the day.”

The biker battle footage was still being looped on the international news and now phone footage was cropping up depicting flagrantly magical events. Fortunately, the central figure was just as blurry and indistinguishable in those as in the news footage and the panicked, amateurish camerawork made it all the less clear. The problems stemmed from the few scraps of clear footage, along with eye-witness accounts gaining media coverage. Fortunately, the outlandish claims were being widely dismissed.

Then came the revelation that one of the French branches of the Network had snuck a category three operative into the country without notifying them and kidnapped someone without any of the Australian branches being any the wiser. If Aram hadn’t been present, the operative could have spun any kind of tale as to why they arrived on the Sydney branch’s doorstep on the verge of death. If not for the Australia’s strongest healer being stationed in its largest city, the French agent would be dead.

Annabeth stormed into medical, looking for said healer. She found her sprawled on a couch in the medical admin, looking like she’d run a marathon. There were a few empty potion bottles lying on the floor, along with a pair that still contained mana potion. Gladys had an old lady name and an old lady age, but her category three powers gave her the looks of an Olympic beach volleyballer, with an athletic body, vibrant skin and dark, lustrous hair.

“Well?” Anna demanded.

Gladys forced her eyes open unhappily.

“It’s done.”

“Did you tell him you were too exhausted to fully heal him?”

“I am too exhausted to fully heal him.”

“Good. Just being collared doesn’t stop him from being dangerous and I doubt the shackles will hold him. Ket, have him moved to containment. Do not give him a spirit coin if he asks.”

Ketevan left and Annabeth turned back to Gladys, still laying back on the couch.

“He was really that damaged?” Annabeth asked.

“I’m amazed he survived long enough to get to us. I’m constantly astounded at the resilience of category three essence magicians, and I am one. I just never want to test that kind of trauma on myself. I completely tapped myself out keeping him alive.”

“What made it so hard?”



“For one thing, those conditions were too resistant to my abilities. I should have been punching down on category two magical ailments. The real problem, though, was the condition type. It was holy.”

“We don’t say holy, Gladys. We say luminous.”

“Stick your nomenclature guidelines up your arse, Anna. It was holy and it was brutal. I only have one power that removes holy conditions and I can’t use it in quick succession. I had to keep healing him between uses to keep him alive while I slowly cleared the conditions off in chunks. Even then, if the damage condition hadn’t been dropping off by itself, I’d have run out of steam before the job was done, even with mana potions.”

“What about cleansing potions for him?”

“He took one before he came, which is the only reason he got to us still alive. I shoved another one in him every time he could take it. What the hell did this to him?”

“You saw the news?” Annabeth asked. “The man knocking over blood servants like bowling pins?”

“It was that guy?”

“Yeah. I really want to get a hold of him, but our French friend had accomplices bundle him up and take him away. Answers are only the beginning of what I want from the Frenchman. I’m going to juice him like an orange.”

“Are you allowed to do that?”

“He didn’t even request entry to Australia, let alone notify us. I’m very much looking forward to discussing protocol violations with whichever French prick has the plums to pick up the phone and complain.”

“And the man who did this to him was taken away?”

“Yes,” Annabeth said unhappily. “We have people looking, but we don’t have a lot to spare while we scramble to clean up the original crap storm. I told the Steering Committee that letting the EOA get their hooks in the media barons was a bad idea. Anyone with a functional brain could see that, but them? No, they’re too clever to bother with a blatantly obvious threat.”

“You have an issue with the Steering Committee, Mrs Tilden?”

The cool, amused voice was a stark contrast to Annabeth’s increasingly wild ranting. She whirled around, trying to school her expression before giving up and letting the rage spill over.

“You know what, Keith?” she asked. “I do. I’ve got a list of emails so long you could deforest a national park and not have enough paper to print them all out. Every one of them is a warning about the problems we need to solve today so they don’t blow up on us

tomorrow. The EOA's influence in the media. The government weakening our position with our international partners. THE FRIGGING BLOOD RIDERS! I warned the committee about the Cabal playing fast and loose months ago, and do you remember what you told me, Keith?"

"Not precisely," Keith said, his amusement gone in the face of his unhinged subordinate.

"You said 'don't rock the boat, Anna. We don't want to cause trouble with the other factions, Anna.' Well, the boat's goddamn capsized, Keith, because I warned you yesterday, now it's today and everything blew the fuck up! And I know who's going to eat it for this, and it sure as hell won't be you, will it Keith?"

"Anna..."

"Keith, did you come here to tell me what a terrible job I'm doing? To replace me? No, no you didn't, because you need a goat you can stake out to shoulder all the blame when the International Committee comes slaving for meat. You think I don't know that I'm done after this? You've got two options, you little prick. Kick me out now, or shut your face while I do my last job however I damn well please."

The young man in the sharp suit looked like he'd been blasted by a gust of wind, while Gladys was tiredly clapping from the couch, even letting out a feeble, laughing cheer.

Keith turned a glare on Gladys, who fired an insolent glare right back.

"Go on, little boy," she told him, getting up from the couch to stand next to Annabeth. "Try and tell me off. Then go explain to the Steering Committee how their category three healer heard about their intentions for my good friend Anna and we ran off to join the Fiji branch and live on a beach. I'm pretty confident they'll take us."

Keith frowned unhappily.

"You're right that people are watching, Anna," he said, "but you and I both know that if anyone can salvage this, it's you. Yes, if this goes wrong, I can't shield you. If you manage to get the lid back on the pot, though, this is your way up. Committee membership. A say in all those decisions you keep protesting."

A lot of the hot air deflated out of Anna.

"Are you blowing smoke up my arse, Keith?"

"Regardless of what you might think, Anna," Keith said, "there are those of us that believe you can be a valuable voice on the committee. I know you're having a rough day, but I need a little less conversation and a little more action, please. A seat at the big table is on the line and not every committee member is as accommodating as I am."

"If you say hysterical woman..." Gladys warned.

“Wouldn’t dream of it. I’m going to take one of the small offices until this thing is sorted. If you need any extra resources, come to me and I’ll clear it. Today, you get anything and everything you need. Just ask and I’ll make it happen.”

Anna looked a little sheepish at her blow up.

“Thanks, Keith. Sorry I kind of exploded on you.”

“Kind of?” Keith asked with a chuckle. “I get it, Anna. You were proved right about all the wrong things and now you’re the one stuck holding the bag. Now that you’ve blown off some steam, are you ready to get back to work?”

“Yeah,” Anna said. “I’ll get it done. Can you try and figure out who the hell sent this French operative here?”

“I’ll even try and figure out why,” Keith said.

“Oh, I know why,” Anna said. “The French caught their outworlder and they wanted the complete set before anyone could confirm what they were.”

“You’re convinced this Asano is an outworlder?”

“Go take a look at the footage Aram took of their fight,” she told him. “Talk to Nigel. He thinks the guy’s fighting is literally out of this world.”

“I’ll do that,” Keith said. “I’ll stop interrupting and let you get back to it. Just remember that some of us do have your back, Anna.”

He left, leaving Annabeth and Gladys together.

“Am I crazy, or did he quote Elvis in there?” Annabeth asked.

“Yep,” Gladys said. “I actually slept with Elvis. Young Elvis, too, not squishy Elvis.”

Annabeth gave her a sideways look.

“He was rubbish,” Gladys continued. “Now Marlon Brando; that guy knew his business. Turns out he was cheating on Rita Moreno with me, though, and then she went and slept with Elvis. She didn’t like it any more than I did.”

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Jason groggily came to in the boot of a moving car. From the rough ride that finally shook him awake, he knew they were on a gravel road. He felt the familiar sensation of a suppression collar, which didn’t worry him. At this point he used them on himself for aura training.

Even a powerful version like the one the Builder had crafted and put him in was something he could negate for at least a few crucial moments. Short of a collar designed to suppress gold-rankers, he was confident that he could deal with it. His problem was that once he did, anyone nearby with aura senses would know about it, while he wouldn’t sense who was in the car until he pushed off the suppression.

He didn't know what condition the silver-ranker was in after their battle. He knew the man had to be in a bad state, but what healing did he have access to? Even if he survived, it should have taken a powerful ally or significant resources to keep him alive. He might not be fully recovered.

Jason, on the other hand, felt physically in top form, to his surprise. Much of Colin's biomass had been destroyed and would need to slowly recover before restoring Jason's full regenerative power, which left a question of why. He would need his system interface back before he got answers.

He knew that the best time to act was while they were still on the move, when his enemies had limited resources in place to deal with him. When he made his move, it would need to be definitive. Once he did, his enemies would learn that suppression collars couldn't truly suppress him. That was not information he was willing to let out.

He pushed out with his aura, negating the bronze-rank suppression collar with ease. Immediately he sensed three bronze-rank presences in the car, but not the silver-ranker. Given that the silver-ranker had snuck up on Jason before, though, it did not mean he wasn't present.

With the return of his interface power, a system message popped up.

- 
- You have been afflicted with a massive dose of [Carfentanil].
  - You have resisted [Carfentanil].
  - [Carfentanil] does not take effect.
  - You have gained multiple instances of [Resistant].
  - You have gained multiple instances of [Integrity].
- 

Apparently they had tried to sedate him before putting the collar on, allowing his Sin Eater power to absorb the affliction. That had given him enough stacks of Integrity to heal him up, explaining his current condition. Even after the collar suppressed the ability that bestowed them, the buff effects apparently continued to work, restoring Jason to full health.

He sensed the reactions from the auras in the front of the car as they became aware of his own. Shifting himself around, he got himself some leverage and pressed his legs against the lid of the boot. After only a few seconds, his superhuman strength was enough to force open the lock and the boot popped open. He conjured his cloak as he pushed himself out of the moving vehicle, which allowed him float into a gentle impact on the gravel road.

The car pulled to a rapid stop. It was night, with no lights in the middle of nowhere other than those of the car. The overcast winter sky blocked out the stars, the moon a

diffuse glow behind the clouds. With his ability to see through darkness, he could clearly make out the three people in the car, one for each of the bronze-rank auras.

The silver-ranker was not present. For the moment it didn't matter if he was dead or just absent, so long as he wasn't around to pose a threat. As for the three bronze-rankers, Jason was about to fill the final moments of their lives with misery, torment and fear.

## Chapter 286

### More Valuable Than a Life

The building looked like any of the other industrial warehouses around it. The inside, however, was an operations centre for the Cabal. Three reinforced security doors lay between the exterior and a set of concrete stairs leading down to a square, concrete room, behind a fourth, even more secure door. The room was empty apart from a cot fixed to the wall and the vampire sitting on it. His hands were held in alchemically-treated handcuffs while his legs were chained in similarly treated manacles.

His clothes were bloody and bedraggled, although the injuries that left them in that state had already been healed by his vampiric regeneration. The effort of doing so had left him hungry and only blood fresh from the source could slake vampiric thirst. They had only allowed him to feed on a live goat which, compared to human blood, was like drinking raw sewerage.

The door opened to admit Vermillion. He had a folding chair that he opened up and placed so he could sit facing the prisoner.

“Hello, Clinton.”

“You must be loving it,” Clinton said, sneering at Vermillion. “Seeing me like this.”

Vermillion sighed.

“You think any of this is good for me?”

“You have the satisfaction of seeing a rival brought low.”

“Rival?” Vermillion said with a pitying look. “That’s what you think? Clinton, before you perpetrated this spectacularly woe begotten disaster, I never gave you a second of thought any time you weren’t standing right in front of me. Is that what this is all about? Trying to prove that you’re better than me?”

“My lineage alone makes me better than you,” Clinton said. “My uncle turned me, and you know who he is. We don’t even know who made you into one of us.”

Vermillion shook his head.

“The Cabal doesn’t care where we came from, Clinton. We each have to prove our worth. You gave the Cabal your measure, yesterday, and this is where it’s gotten you.”

“My uncle won’t stand for this.”

Vermillion shook his head, not bothering to respond. He stood up, left the cell and walked up the concrete stairs. Another man was waiting at the top with a grave expression.

“Craig,” the man greeted.

“Franklin.”

“Sorry again about all this.”

“It is what it is,” Vermillion said. “Instead of complaining about what we can’t fix, we need to get on with fixing what we can.”

Franklin nodded soberly. He made his way down the stairs and into the cell.

“Hello Clinton,” Franklin said, claiming the seat left by Vermillion. Franklin’s features had a vague resemblance to Clinton, but Clinton’s appearance was middle-aged, while Franklin looked no more than thirty at most.

“Uncle Frank, you have to get me out of this.”

“I tried to keep you from getting into it,” Franklin said. “You never met the requirements for the clan to consider making you one of us, but I convinced them to be compassionate. The only reason they let me turn you was that without it, you would have died.”

“I’ve proven myself.”

“Yes,” Franklin said. “You’ve certainly made your value clear. Your ambitions have outstripped your abilities at every turn. The unrelentingly disappointing results of every task assigned to you has demonstrated the value of the clan’s recruiting policies. Getting involved with the Blood Riders was very nearly the final straw and I had to fight to give you the chance to clean up your own mess. I warned you that this was a final chance for you, and what did you do? You caused a disaster.”

“It’s just a few dead bikers.”

“Innocent people are dead, Clinton. The Network is on the warpath. We’re burning political capital like kindling to stop this from permanently hurting the Cabal’s position in this city. This entire country. The world is watching and not just the magical world.”

“It wasn’t my fault. If people didn’t show so much favouritism to Vermillion, I never would have needed to make such bold moves.”

“Bold? It is that what you call the most idiotic act of self destruction I can conceive of? Did someone put you up this? I know your not smart enough to be a conspirator, but if someone used you, then they found a fine tool indeed.”

“It was Vermillion that pushed me to this!”

“Vermillion? I suppose I can see that. He draws favour because he’s competent; cautious and meticulous, with excellent foresight. A poster child for everything you lack. He might be careful and patient enough to set you up for this without it being tracked back to him, but he’s smart enough to know that this has a million unseen ways to go wrong. He’s in the doghouse now for failing to stop you before you caused this debacle.”

Clinton sneered, only to be startled as Franklin slapped him hard across the face.

“You’re happy? Do you have any idea of what I owe him, now? You’re my responsibility, which means the blame for your actions falls on me. I’m in a worse position than Vermillion because of this. So now I have to make a gesture to prove my loyalty and contrition, both to the clan and to the Cabal.”

“What kind of gesture?” Clinton asked warily.

“A sacrifice. After all the trouble you’ve caused me, you will finally demonstrate some worth. Like everything else about you, it’s only your relationship to me that gives you any value at all. The Cabal and the clan are both severing ties with you. You’re being handed over to the Network. My facilitation of this is my show of loyalty and contrition. One of many that will continue until long after you’re dead.”

“You can’t.”

“It’s already done, Clinton. You were never going to get out of this with a clean death after killing Julius. He had some actual potential, which is why we had him riding herd over you. We wanted him to see what not to do, but you taught that lesson too well. Then, true to form, you mess up disposing of the body. I mean, bloody hell, boy. If you’re going to saw a man into pieces, get some garbage bags or a plastic sheet or something. I mean, pillow cases? You can’t even fail properly. You are the worst vampire in the world.”

“My actions were decisive and ruthless,” Clinton argued. “Those are the things a vampire should be.”

“In control is what a vampire should be, Clinton. That was never you. I should have refused my sister. I apologise for not letting you die the death of a normal man. You would have died quietly and been remembered fondly.”

“Surely there’s something that you can do,” Clinton begged.

“I will be paying for your sins for a long time, Clinton. I have neither the ability nor the desire to absolve them. Even before this, you were baiting the EOA into making a move on Vermillion. That is an act directly in contravention of Cabal interests, in service to your personal ambition. If Vermillion hadn’t defused the situation, you’d have antagonised the Network, the EOA, our own people and a potentially valuable ally all in one fell swoop. Thankfully – and true to form – you failed. But for some inexplicable reason, this was the one time that you didn’t let one knock back stop you and did what it took to aggravate them all anyway. You even went above and beyond, throwing them into a frenzy. At least you can die knowing that your actions left a large footprint.”

“You can’t hand me over,” Clinton said angrily. “I’ll tell the Network every clan and Cabal secret I know!”



"I know," Franklin said sadly. "As much as I hoped that time would temper you into steel, I knew from the beginning that you were pig iron. This is why you were never inducted into our greater secrets. You can't give the Network information they don't already know, although I expect they will be very thorough in checking."

Franklin got to his feet.

"This is the last time we'll meet, Clinton. Anything you have left to say, say it now."

"Uncle, it wasn't my fault..."

"I meant something new, Clinton. I've heard that many times before."

Franklin made his way back upstairs, where Vermillion was waiting for him.

"That can't have been easy," Vermillion said.

"It was a long time coming," Franklin said. "All of our problems today can be laid at the feet of my mercy. How bad is it?"

"Bad," Vermillion said. "Magic came within a hair's breadth of being revealed today, and the Network are on the warpath. The big question mark is this man Asano. I don't know what he'll do after what happened."

"Didn't the Network take him?"

"I believe the answer to that is complicated," Vermillion said. "Not least by the question of whether or not they can hold him."

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"I don't like that Sebastian isn't with us," Luc said. He was in the front passenger seat.

"You think any of us like it?" Paul asked. He was driving the car along the gravel road, through the open landscape of the Australian Bush. The dark sky hid the panorama, forcing him to drive carefully.

"You saw the condition Sebastian was in," Paul said. "I've never seen anyone more in need of healing."

"That's exactly my problem," Luc said. "We all saw what the target did to Sebastian. What if he wakes up?"

"He's not going to wake up," Nicolas said from the back seat. "With what we pumped into him, I'm amazed he's still alive, category two or no. When he finally comes to, I won't be shocked if we need to get the brain damage healed."

The three Frenchmen were driving along a rural gravel road in rural New South Wales, heading for a largely disused airstrip. With an overcast night sky and an absence of population centres by design, the headlight of their car was a lonely ship in a sea of black.

"What I hate is that we have to fly back out," Paul said.

“Nothing to be done about it,” Nicolas said. “You can’t force someone through a portal, even if they’re out cold.”

“What about Sebastian?” Luc asked.

“What about him?” Paul asked. “He told us to go without him.”

“I know he said that, but are we really going to just leave him?” Luc asked.

“You’re damn right we are,” Nicolas said. “At this point he needs to be extracted diplomatically, not tactically. It’s out of our hands. Our job is to get the target home without the locals pinning us down. Sebastian left us his phone so that none of us...”

He looked pointedly at Luc.

“...would be stupid enough to try and make contact.”

“Is the target going to stay unconscious all the way to France?” Paul asked.

“I have some top-ups to keep him out,” Nicolas said. “He’s not waking up any time soon.”

Suddenly all three felt an aura sweep over them from the boot of the car.

“That’s not possible,” Nicolas said. “Even if he did somehow wake up, he’s collared.”

“Maybe there was something wrong with the collar,” Luc said.

“You think they sent us all this way without checking the collar?” Paul asked.

“Pull the car over!” Nicolas ordered.

As they argued, they heard the boot spring open. Paul pulled the car to a rapid stop, throwing up gravel as he braked hard and the three piled out of the car. They saw the open boot and looked around in the darkness.

“I can’t see a thing,” Luc said.

“He’s going to be a pain to track down like this,” Nicolas said. “Paul, give us some light.”

As they peered out into the black, Paul raised an arm above his head and a large, flaming sphere appeared, floating in the air and shedding a red light. Shockingly, it revealed that the group was surrounded by figures of inky darkness, almost on top of them.

They all reacted immediately. Luc transformed his body into solid stone, while Paul summoned a whip made of fire. Nicolas conjured an assault rifle and started wildly spraying bullets all round them. As bullets were directly conjured into the gun, he was not forced to pause and reload, feeding his mana into it as quickly as the conjured weapon would take it. The muzzle flash caused a blinding strobe as he swept the gun back and forth, spewing bullets in every direction. When Nicolas finally stopped and the blast of

gunfire was replaced by eerie silence, the dark figures were gone, as if they had never been.

“What were those things?” Paul asked.

“You think I know?” Nicolas asked.

“I think you killed them, or drove them off,” Luc said. As he did, blue and orange lights lit up in the distance, drawing the attention of all three. Focused on the distance, they only noticed the shadowy figure moving behind them in the red light when they turned after feeling the sting of a blade slicing along their skin. Nicolas and Paul both received cuts on the neck, but Luc’s bubble shield briefly flared into visibility. It intercepted the attack before it even reached his stone flesh.

The light that had distracted them had dimmed into nothingness.

“Not much of a wound,” Paul said, patting his neck. “I’ve had plenty worse.”

“I bet Sebastian had too,” Nicolas said. “This prick uses poison, genius.”

“Should we start searching?” Luc asked.

“Forget that,” Paul said. “We knew going in that this mission had a high failure chance. I’m not fighting the guy that did that to Sebastian in the dark.”

“Agreed,” Nicolas said. “Let’s just get in the car and go.”

As their short debate over what to do came to an end, the blue and orange lights appeared again. There was one larger light, with four smaller ones orbiting it. Two of the smaller lights broke away from the others and started flying towards them. They were not slow, but did not match the speed of a bullet or even an arrow.

“Block or dodge?” Luc asked, even as the other two were scrambling out of the light’s path. The two lights made a direct line for their car, merging together just as they impacted it. The resulting explosion blasted Paul and Nicolas, even having fled, although they were only sent tumbling with minimal damage.

Luc was closer but also barely hurt. His bubble shield absorbed enough of the blast, which seemed poorly suited to penetrate the magical shield. The sheer power of the blast did make it collapse, but what little force remained splashed against Luc’s stone body, leaving small cracks in it. Luc felt a flicker of panic, realising that the blast was clearly more effective against his stone body than the magic shield, but it was a spent force.

The car, unlike its former occupants, was far more than superficially damaged. It had been torn open like someone with fat fingers and no coordination had tried to split a sandwich with someone by pulling it in half. It was certainly no longer driveable.

Lying in the light scrub off the side of the road where he had been thrown by the explosion, Paul yelled out in fresh pain. Nicolas scrambled to his feet as Luc went to check

on him, only for a shadowy figure to appear behind Nicolas, lashing out several times before vanishing as Nicolas echoed Paul's exclamations.

"What's going on?" Luc asked in a panic as he helped Paul to his feet. "This shouldn't be possible! He's meant to be collared!"

"What do we do?" Paul called out to Nicolas, but Nicolas had no answers. He stared at the wreckage of the car under the bloody illumination of the fiery orb, the car's own light having died. The only answer came from a voice as cold and dark as the black winter night.

*"Bleed for me."*

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Luc had strong defensive powers, with his magical shield and his earth form powers. His means of attack were powerful but simple, and he generally relied on his teammates to pin down the enemy for him to finish off. His teammates had died around him, however, without his catching more than a glimpse of their attacker. There had only been the merciless voice chanting sinister incantations as Paul and Nicolas fired powers wildly into the dark to no discernable effect, until they succumbed to death.

Luc broke down as his companions ended their screaming, leaving dark carcasses of blackened flesh with the unnerving stillness of death. More lights lit up on the empty road, this time not blue and orange but the silver pinprick of stars. The night sky, hidden beyond the dark clouds of winter, had taken the form of a man. Luc remembered the stories of the starlight angel that had been on the news. He knew that for him, this was no angel of mercy.

He didn't fight back, merely watching the approaching figure with defiance. He wasn't even thinking of it as the target anymore. It was more like a monster, born of the dark. It moved slowly, finally appearing before him, all darkness and stars. It moved over Paul's body, then over Nicolas. It reached up and pulled a suppression collar from the impenetrable dark of its hood. The collar then vanished from its hand and it turned its attention to Luc.

"You're going to tell me the things I want to know," came the hard, ruthless voice.

"I don't care if you collar and torture me," Luc said. "Even without my powers, my body can take the pain."

"I believe you," the voice said as Luc felt something crushing down on his aura like a fist around an egg.

"Can your soul?" the voice asked.

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Jason discovered that the advantage of holding a person's soul in his hand was that the person was quite incapable of lies and evasions going undetected. He didn't feel good about executing the man in cold blood after exhausting his knowledge. Being honest with himself, he didn't feel all that bad, either. The ability to negate the effects of suppression collars was a trump card for Jason's most vulnerable moments, as his current circumstances neatly demonstrated. The secret was more valuable than a life, at least the life of a man that had kidnapped him.

Before he died, the man filled in many important details for Jason, both about why the men had come for him and about the Network. For centuries the Network had been a series of independent secret societies and apparently old games of competitiveness and resource hoarding continued through to the present. It was a more fractious organisation than Vermillion's description had led him to believe, although Vermillion was an outsider and total accuracy was not to be expected.

This did not automatically mean that the local branch would be an ally, rather than an enemy. Given what the man had revealed, he hoped they would be. The most important thing he had learned from the Frenchman was that the Network branch in Lyon had the other outworlder in its custody. Jason hoped that the factional conflict was sufficient that the local Network would help him take the outworlder from the Lyon branch, as he knew that trying it alone was suicide.

Jason failed to learn anything else about the other outworlder as the Frenchman knew nothing about them. He suggested that their leader, Sebastian, might, but he had gone to the local Network branch for healing. The man Jason questioned suspected that the local branch would detain Sebastian to squeeze some concessions out of the French, given that they were not meant to be in the country at all.

He opened his map ability to check his destination. He could get back to Sydney in a couple of portal jumps, as he had visited places in his range in the past. He was even within range of his uncle's farm, where his mother grew up. He could use some time to think; to consider what he'd learned and weigh his options. He had Shade take a car form and take off back toward Sydney.

His demolition of the biker gang and what he did to his attackers, even the one that most likely survived, demonstrated the kind of threat he presented to those who chose to provoke him. Now was the time to show that he wasn't just a mad dog and could be reasoned with. He'd shown plenty of big stick and it was time for some juicy carrot. He needed to test the waters with the local Network branch and, if possible, ask Sebastian some pointed questions. It was time for a meeting with Annabeth Tilden.

As he sat in thought, Shade taking care of the driving, Gordon manifested in the seat next to him. Unlike normal vehicles, Shade was able to contain Gordon's incorporeal form without him passing right through. Gordon's floating eyes looked at Jason expectantly and Jason nodded, pulling out his phone.

Jason had looted it from one of the bodies before he had Colin and Gordon annihilate them. Their bodies were not sufficiently composed of magic to dissolve into rainbow smoke, but his power did save him rifling through their pockets. He had retrieved his own phone, plus theirs and the key to the suppression collar around his neck.

He had crafted some single-use keys that probably would have worked, but he wasn't entirely confident that his self-made product would work. He also didn't have a lot of them.

After the bodies were disposed of, he had Gordon break the car down into chunks of scrap he threw off into the scrub. It was possible someone could use a GPS record to track the spot, but there was nothing left that could cause him any problems.

Getting rid of the bodies sent his thoughts drifting to his own corpse, left behind in the astral space. It probably did dissolve into rainbow smoke, at least partially. He had known for a long time that he was no longer a human, but thinking about his body dissolving like a monster brought it home in a fresh way.

He had used a precious droplet of crystal wash to prevent his phone from picking up a corpse smell. He loaded up a movie, which Shade was able to project onto the windscreen.

"This one's called Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory," Jason told Gordon. "It's a good one."

## Chapter 287

### Uncontrolled Factor

Annabeth's eyes snapped open. As a category one, her senses were only slightly heightened, but something had triggered an instinctive reaction and awakened her. Straining her aura senses, she couldn't detect anything that might have set them off.

Next to her, Susan remained in blissful slumber. Anna silently slipped out of bed, taking a pistol and a flask from her nightstand. She took a swig of the flask, the stamina potion kicking her senses fully awake. She would have preferred a spirit coin, but the Network insisted on using the whole stockpile to make bullets or use in rituals. Her pistol was loaded with exactly those magical bullets, as well as being enchanted itself.

Wearing only her underwear, she slunk downstairs, spotting a light from the kitchen. Moving into it without a sound, she found someone peering into the fridge, which was the source of light.

"You broke into the wrong house, mate." she said, levelling her gun.

"Tell me about it," Jason complained, turning to the kitchen island and putting down a plate holding a sandwich. "Your condiment selection is terrible. Susan clearly didn't marry you for your culinary skills."

He looked over at her, standing in her underwear with a gun pointed at him.

"Still, I can see the appeal," he acknowledged. "I mean, a beautiful woman in her underwear pointing her gun at me?"

He took a big bite of his sandwich.

"I love my life," he mumbled through the food.

"You're Jason Asano."

"Yep. Have been for a while, which makes it easy to remember."

He frowned at the sandwich in his hand.

"With what you had in the fridge," he said, "I could barely assemble an above average sandwich, and I do not appreciate being reduced to mid-tier sandwiches. I'll add it to the list of things the Network needs to answer for. Did you get this bread from a supermarket?"

"What are you doing here?" Annabeth asked. "How are you here? You were kidnapped, drugged and collared."

"Silver-rankers kidnap me from time to time. It's kind of my thing. You should just go to a bakery. You'll be supporting local business and you won't get bread that tastes like sadness."

"Silver-rankers?"

“Right, uh, tier three? Category three? Is that what you call it? If I hadn’t spent the last six months in a pocket universe fighting evil, I’d at least have a decent sauce on hand.”

“What about the people that took you?”

“The three French guys? You don’t need to worry about local authorities stumbling into them. I’m more interested in the fourth one, Sebastian. You do have him, right? He and I never got the chance to talk.”

“What do you want with him?”

“My needs are many and varied; he’s just a part of it. Craig Vermillion seems to think that you and I can help each other. I’m hoping that he’s right.”

“So you broke into my house?”

“I wanted a meeting on my terms. If I wandered into your headquarters, you might start thinking like your counterparts from Lyon.”

“You know about that?”

“I had a little chat with the blokes who took me for a drive. If you’re looking to dig deeper, these might help.”

He took out two mobile phones and placed them on the counter.

“One of these belongs to Sebastian, the other to one of his flunkies. I reset the unlock codes to 0-0-0-0.”

“You can hack phones?”

“I know a few simple unlocking rituals. One of the more esoteric ones got the job done. One of the cheaper ones, which was nice, although I don’t have any shortage of iron-rank spirit coins. That’s category one, I guess. Like you. And that gun. Magic guns are a thing, I guess. You do have spirit coins, here, right?”

“Yeah. What’s with the iron-rank, silver-rank thing? Is that what they call the categories in the other world?”

“Yep. They named the ranks after the colours of spirit coins. They’re all crystal, but the category ones look like iron, twos like bronze and so on. It’s the same colour that shines out of you when your attributes advance or you get a gift evolution. You do understand these concepts, right?”

“We call it minor threshold advancement.”

“See? We’re learning from each other already. That gun isn’t conjured, right?”

“No.”

“One of the French blokes kept conjuring guns. Is there a gun essence?”

“There is.”



“No kidding. I have this mate who theorised that different worlds had different essences.”

“You really were over there, weren’t you?” she asked, finally lowering the pistol she had been holding on him the whole time. “What was that you said about a pocket universe?”

“Oh, I spent about a year in the other world, then another six months a small side-reality. To be honest, I was only fighting evil at the end. Mostly it was just monsters.”

“I can’t imagine the kind of experiences you must have had.”

She looked down at his t-shirt, emblazoned with the text I WENT TO A MAGICAL ALTERNATE UNIVERSE AND ALL I GOT WAS VAST COSMIC POWER.

“I’m not entirely sure that I want to,” she added as Jason flashed her an impish grin.

“Look,” Jason said. “I have a lot to offer your organisation. Knowledge, insight. Smouldering sensuality. You know it; the French certainly know it. I’m sure you recognise the potential of someone who’s been where I’ve been. On paper, your Network and me are a good fit, but the relationship has started out very poorly.”

“We would like to work with you, obviously,” Annabeth said. “You have a demonstrated penchant for public chaos that troubles us, though.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “But since you have a demonstrated penchant for kidnapping me, I wouldn’t go claiming the moral high ground.”

“That was the Lyon branch.”

“And why should I think you will act any different than the people who sent that French prick to kick my arse?”

“You kicked back pretty hard. If we didn’t have a category three healer, he would have died.”

“You’ve got a silver-rank healer? Nice.”

“She’s more subtle than roaming the halls of a hospital playing faith healer,” Annabeth said.

“She does help regular people, then?”

“Of course. What’s the point of having healing magic if you can’t help the people that need it most? We run a private clinic that allows us to find and help needy people without the news talking about angels made of stars. We can quietly find patients and clean up any troublesome hospital records. Do you realise how much what you did has hurt the operation of the children’s hospital? There’s investigations, oversight, the media debacle. Yes, you helped some people that really needed it, but you hurt people, too. Do you have any understanding of consequences?”

“That’s... traditionally been a weak area for me,” Jason said, head bowed in contrition. “I like that clinic you mentioned. I’d like to get in on that, if we end up working together.”

“That’s one of the things you have to offer,” Annabeth said. “What is it that you want from us?”

“If you’re not smart enough to figure that out, I don’t want to work with you,” Jason said.

“The Lyon branch,” Annabeth said. “We’re pretty sure they have an outworlder. You want that outworlder.”

“Bang on,” Jason said. “I’m not what you’d call happy with the Network right now.”

“We’re not over the moon with you, either,” she said. “Killing people on the news. Playing angel at a children’s’ hospital.”

“The latter was to draw you out so I could investigate you,” Jason said. “As for the bikers, I did go overboard, there.”

“Overboard? Six innocent bystanders were killed and we still don’t know how many were injured.”

Jason paled.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I really am. I didn’t think when they attacked. I just fought. I’m not used to worrying about collateral damage.”

“It’s why we have rules.”

Jason nodded.

“I’m not going to work for your organisation,” he said, “but I will work with it, if we can hammer out an arrangement. Including rules. I think that some boundaries might be good for me, right now.”

“Then we need to have a conversation somewhere other than my kitchen,” Annabeth said. “While I’m wearing clothes.”

“Do you sleep in a bra?” Jason asked. “That can’t be comfortable.”

“I just kind of crashed out,” Annabeth said defensively. “Someone’s antics didn’t leave me time to sleep for two days. Finally I get to bed and you pop up in my damn kitchen.”

“Sorry,” he said, plucking a fistful of spirit coins from his inventory and placing them on the table. “By way of apology.”

“So, what now?” she asked.

“Now, I’m taking my uncle and getting out of Sydney for a while. If your people come after me, I know that a deal is off the table and we go to war. If not, we can work something out.”

“War?”

“If the Network is going to keep coming after me,” Jason said, “I’m not just going to sit back and wait.”

“You lost to one category three. You can’t take us all on.”

“I don’t need to fight you to beat you,” Jason said. “I just need a press conference. If I go public, you’ll have bigger problems than me to deal with. Also, I can start flogging Starlight Rider merch. That’s a whole thing.”

“I can talk cooperation,” Annabeth said. “I have people that I answer to, though. They don’t like uncontrolled factors, and you’re an uncontrolled factor in an absurd shirt.”

“I do have a way of frustrating authority figures,” Jason admitted. “I’m not what you’d call sorry about that, but I do recognise that my personal proclivities make things more difficult. Talk to your people and ask what they’d like to see as a gesture of good faith. I’ll see what I can do.”

“You’ll want a similar gesture from us, too right?”

“Of course. I want everything you know about this outworlder in France.”

“What do you know already?”

“Nothing,” Jason said. “All I know is that when I came back, someone came with me.”

“We don’t know anything ourselves.” Annabeth said. “We’re working on that. I’m pressing Sebastian and my boss is pressing his boss. They haven’t even admitted to having an outworlder yet. In the meantime, how do I contact you?”

“I left my phone number on the whiteboard on your fridge. I also added some things to your shopping list. Get your kitchen in order, lady. Your pasta sauce selection alone is a travesty. Buy some damn tomatoes.”

“Your sister’s a TV chef, isn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

“Does she know you’re back?”

“I wanted to get some things settled before I come back from the dead. I don’t want to bring my mess down on my family. Will your people come looking for trouble?”

“I think everyone will be happier if our interactions are civil,” Annabeth said. “There’s been far too much action going on. What do you think of Craig Vermillion as a middleman for the moment?”

“You’ll use Cabal personnel?”

“They owe us big, and they know it.”

“Alright,” Jason agreed. “I’m going to work under the assumption that I can walk down the street without the Network trying to drag me into a van. But don’t think that I’ll keep

letting your people come after me without reprisal. I'm going to let you get back to bed. Stay in touch."

He closed the fridge, which was the only source of light. Annabeth found the light switch in the dark but he was gone by the time she flipped it. Her supernatural senses hadn't been able to track him when he was standing in front of her, let alone when he vanished in the dark.

"Go to bed, right," she muttered.

Flicking the light back off, she trudged back upstairs, not for her bed but for her phone.

"I should have shot him."

\*\*\*

In Hiro's apartment, Hiro clasped Jason in a hug.

"We heard some kind of explosion outside and saw those men pile you into their car. I didn't know what to do, so I contacted Vermillion. He said to hold tight."

"Sorry to worry you, Uncle. I'm fine."

"That's good," Taika said. "You're our guide to all the crazy stuff that's happening."

"Well, I shouldn't be dragged away any time soon," Jason said.

"You were literally just dragged off," Taika said. "What happened, bro?"

"It's political. Some people from France wanted me and weren't too worried about it being on a voluntary basis. They've been handled, for the moment, at least. Has anyone bothered you?"

"Vermillion brought the EOA people around and we came to a preliminary agreement."

"They gave you good terms?"

"Very. It seems like Vermillion talked Victor around and the EOA are feeling generous now they're looking at a smooth transition."

"How did he get Victor on board, do you know?"

"He said that the EOA can give Victor something that he's always wanted but Vermillion was never permitted to give himself."

"That makes sense," Jason said.

He knew that Victor wanted to learn more about the magical world, but the Cabal had always kept him at a remove. From what Vermillion had told Jason, the EOA had no such qualms.

“Alright,” Jason said. “I’ve made contact with certain people and, for the moment, we should remain unmolested. In the morning, we’re going to pack it up and head for home. Have you made your arrangements, Taika?”

“Yeah, bro. I talked to my family. I don’t want them anywhere near this.”

“Good call. We’ll be on the road for a few hours tomorrow. I can give you a proper introduction to the world I’ve landed you all in.”

\*\*\*

In front of Hiro’s apartment building, Jason looked at the cloud flask in his hand with dissatisfaction. Instead of the cloud stuff emerging when he opened the stopper, he received a system message.

- 
- Cloud constructs cannot operate in zones of barren magic.
  - Add vortex accumulator to cloud constructs to allow operation in zones of barren magic.

#### Vortex Accumulator requirements (bronze rank):

- 1 [Magic Essence].
- 1 [Gathering Essence].
- 100 bronze-rank [Vortex Quintessence Gems].
- 1000 [Bronze Spirit Coins].
  
- Bronze-rank vortex accumulator will allow for cloud constructs of up to current rank (bronze) forms to function in zones of extremely low magical density. Higher-rank materials will be required for it to operate in higher-rank forms.

---

“That’s suspicious,” he muttered to himself.

“What is?” Hiro asked.

“My magic item here needs a bunch of very expensive materials for an upgrade. Materials I just so happen to have on hand. I’m starting to wonder if it took a look at my supplies and decided to scam me.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Hiro said.

“I get that a lot.”

Jason had fed a lot of materials into the cloud flask to enhance its utility, mostly varieties of quintessence gems, but also crystal wash and various kinds of magical metal, stone and fabric that helped create surfaces that were not just soft and malleable. It was difficult to chop vegetables when the knife just pushed them through a countertop made of nice, soft clouds. Emir had warned him that the most powerful upgrades would require full essences, such as his current circumstance, but the specifics were a little coincidental.

A magic essence wasn't an oddity, as they were common and Jason had several on hand. The gathering essence, on the other hand, was a rare essence that he also coincidentally happened to have.

In the only instance of it ever happening in his experience, the blood weaver his team fought in the astral space had produced not one but three essences when looted. While not an unheard of event, it was a less common occurrence than even a legendary essence appearing.

As for the vortex quintessence gems, Jason had a goodly amount after fighting dangerous silver-rank monsters called vortex elementals. All his vortex gems were silver-rank, though, rather than bronze.

"Can I set up a silver-rank accumulator before I rank up the flask to silver?" he asked.

---

#### Vortex Accumulator requirements (silver rank):

- 1 [Magic Essence].
- 1 [Gathering Essence].
- 100 silver-rank [Vortex Quintessence Gems].
- 1000 [Silver Spirit Coins].
  
- Silver-rank vortex accumulator will allow for cloud constructs of up to silver rank forms to function in zones of extremely low magical density. Higher-rank materials will be required for higher-rank forms to function.

---

"A thousand silver coins," he muttered. "That'll take a good chunk out of the supply."

Taika and Hiro looked at each other as Jason continued to mutter seeming nonsense to himself while staring at what looked like a boiling flask in his hand. Then they watched as he started pulling objects out of the air, like a stage magician.

He started with a funnel, which he placed into the end of the flask. Then he started shoving silver coins into the funnel by the fistful, followed by what looked like opals. Then there was a blue, glowing cube, which dissolved into mist, followed by another cube that was black and white that likewise dissolved into the flask. Afterwards, he took out the funnel and replaced the flask's stopper.

"Sorry about this," he said to Hiro and Taika. "It needs a few minutes to percolate, but it should be fine now. You can bring down the bags."

"You're a weird bloke, bro," Taika said and headed back inside.

## Chapter 288

### Agendas

“Finally,” Jason said. He was standing in front of Hiro’s apartment building with the cloud flask in his hand.

- 
- **Vortex accumulator (silver rank) complete.**
  - **Available forms (iron rank): Cloud house (grand), cloud house (adaptive).**
  - **Available forms (bronze rank): Carriage house (grand), carriage house (adaptive).**
- 

“Alright,” Jason said happily.

“Are you certain you should do this in front of the apartment building?” Shade asked from his shadow. “We are fully exposed to the street.”

“Yeah, I’d best take it around the side,” Jason said. “Flaunting it out in the open might not be the best idea.”

“What are you doing exactly?” Hiro asked.

“I told you,” Jason said. “Sorting out a ride.”

“Will it be like a magic carpet or something?” Taika asked. He had luggage for himself and Hiro piled outside the building entrance.

“Sadly, no,” Jason said. “It will be a bit more roomy, though.”

Jason made his way around the side of the building, between the apartment complex and the townhouse in which he had been staying. He pulled the stopper from the cloud flask and two wisps of cloud-stuff came snaking out to form two separate shapes, floating above the opening. One was a house and one was a long, wheelless vehicle, looking oddly like a hovercraft tour bus. He waved his hand through the vehicle image and then set the flask on the ground where cloud stuff started streaming out in earnest.

“It’ll take about ten minutes,” Jason said to Hiro and Taika.

The three men watched as the stream of cloud-stuff slowly compressed itself into the form of a huge recreational vehicle. It was double-decked and generally enormous, at four metres high and fourteen metres long. The driving station was visible through a glass bubble sticking out from the top level of the vehicle’s front.

“Bro, that’s one of them super-expensive motorhomes. How’d you fit it in a bottle? Oh wait, magic. I’m still getting used to that.”

“These things are basically a luxury yacht on wheels,” Hiro said. “They normally go for upwards of three million, but I’m guessing this one cost a little more.”

"I'm not clear on the exchange rate," Jason said. "I won this one in a competition and I've still been sinking money into it. Often literally."

"What kind of competition?" Hiro asked.

"Retrieving the symbolic weapon of an ancient order of assassins from a pocket universe."

"I have no idea how to respond to that," Hiro said. "I no longer have any basis for what ridiculous is."

"What's with the license plate?" Taika asked, prompting Jason and Hiro to look. It read RPR-MAN.

"Are you a repair man?" Taika asked. "That seems odd to put on an expensive magical motor home."

"Nope," Jason said. "I'm not sure what that's about."

"It's not repair man," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow. "It's Reaper Man."

"Shade, have you been messing with my cloud flask?"

"No," Shade said. "I think it recognises that I'll be the one driving."

"That's fair," Jason said. "I'm starting to have some suspicions about the cloud flask, though. It seems awfully reactive for a magic item."

"The cloud flask is a profoundly sophisticated item, bound to your soul. What you perceive as reactions to its environment are, in fact, effected by your unconscious control."

"So, you're saying that I'm the repair man," Jason reasoned.

"It's Reaper Man," Shade insisted. "I am quite certain it refers to me."

Hiro and Taika were watching the pair converse, their eyes glued warily on Shade. It was not the first time they had encountered him, but they were still unnerved by having the magical entity in their midst. Jason glanced in their direction.

"Blokes, I know this is all still fresh, but you're in the shallow end of the pool. You haven't even met Colin, yet."

"Colin?"

"He's my other mate. He's still recovering after fighting with that prick who kidnapped me."

"Is he going to try again?"

"I don't think so," Jason said. "The local authorities have him in custody. Of course, those local authorities might try and kidnap me themselves, but hopefully they decide to go in another direction."

A sleek, black, two-door car pulled up in front of the apartment. Jason wasn't a car person and didn't recognise it, but it was clearly an old classic. Vermillion emerged,



walking around the side of the building where the others were gathered. His attention was immediately drawn to Shade, while Jason eyed off Vermillion's car.

"Nice car," Jason asked.

"1967 Maserati Ghibli," Vermillion said proudly. "I've actually had it since '67, too."

"It's a little on the nose isn't it?" Jason asked. "I mean, if you asked me what kind of car a vampire drives, that's exactly what I'd think of."

"I do have an image to maintain," Vermillion said. "And I don't think you're the one to go throwing stones over ostentatious black cars. Hello Shade."

"Mr Vermillion," Shade returned the greeting.

Vermillion greeted Hiro and Taika, inquiring how they were handling the recent revelations they had experienced. Their still uneasy reaction to him, once an object of deep fear for both, told Vermillion more than their mumbled responses.

"Is this yours?" Vermillion asked Jason, looking over the huge, white motorhome.

"Yep."

"Is it that crazy expensive European model? I didn't pay you that much for the gold."

"No, it's custom," Jason said. "Very custom. I brought it back with me."

"You brought a motorhome back from an alternate reality?"

"I brought the power to teleport back from an alternate reality and this is what surprises you?"

"It's a matter of perspective," Vermillion said. "Teleport powers I can see in a magical alternate universe. RV dealerships seem like they'd be less prominent."

"They had all kinds of magic vehicles," Jason said. "There were magical carriages that were kind of like old-timey cars. I had a friend who used to drive us around a river delta on an airboat to do jobs. It was great."

"An airboat? Like an Everglades-style airboat?"

"Yep. There was kind of a hover version for travelling through the desert, too. Oh, and giant sand barges. It was very Jabba the Hutt. Oh, and an underwater subway. That was awesome."

"I'd love to see all that," Vermillion said.

"I have recordings of a lot of it," Jason said. "I'll show you some time. So what brings you by? Is it about the Network, or are you just sending us off?"

"Annabeth Tilden did contact me."

"What do you think of her?" Jason asked.

“She’s one of the good ones,” Vermillion said. “Be aware that she has people she answers to, however. She may be in charge of direct operations for her branch, but the people above her have the ultimate oversight.”

“Is that why she wanted you to play go between?” Jason asked. “Someone outside her chain of command?”

“I think she’s sensitive to what happens if you get pushed too far. She was very happy that you didn’t lay your kidnapping at the feet of the entire Network.”

“I’m not ruling anything out, at this stage,” Jason said.

“How are you holding up?” Vermillion asked.

“It’s not like I’ve never been kidnapped before.”

“It’s not?”

“I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

“We might have that chance sooner rather than later,” Vermillion said. “I actually came to tell you about my demotion. After everything that happened, it’s been decided to give someone else oversight of the Cabal’s Sydney operations. I’m being moved to somewhere more modest.”

“They’re banishing you to the middle of nowhere?”

“It shouldn’t be too bad,” Vermillion said. “It’s a little tourist town up the coast. We’re anticipating a rise in magical activity in the near future, so they’ve decided to assign someone to keep an eye on things. Namely, me.”

Jason laughed.

“I see. Well, would you like to travel with us, then?”

“I have my car,” Vermillion said.

“Oh, I can sort that out,” Jason said.

The size and weight limit of Jason’s inventory slots had increased with his rank and he successfully managed to fit Vermillion’s car. He lifted up the front end with his formidable strength and pushed it into the inventory window, causing the car to vanish.

“What did you do to my car?” Vermillion asked as Taika and Hiro goggled at the space it had been in. They were still far from inured to Jason’s casual use of magic.

“I just stored it,” Jason said. “It’s fine. Probably.”

“Probably?”

“I’ll pull it back out when we get there. Come on, let’s check out the new wheels. I haven’t had a chance to test this thing out, yet.”

“I’m certainly curious,” Vermillion said. “Why does the license plate say repair man?”

\*\*\*

Annabeth stood at the end of the table addressing the Steering Committee.

“Asano knows his value to us,” she said. “Or at least he’s made some good guesses. Look at the coins I just handed out. He left those for me on my kitchen counter. We’ve had them checked and they’re authentic, category one spirit coins. Note the personalised design.”

Keith peered at the coin between his fingers, depicting a man giving a thumbs up. On the other side was embossed text.

PRODUCT OF JASON

G'DAY MATE!

“He didn’t just leave these on a whim,” Annabeth said. “He wanted us to see them. These are personalised, which means he not only has however many coins he brought back with him, but a looting power. If he’s figured out that looting powers are the only source we have for spirit coins in our world, and that our branch doesn’t have one, he knows that his value to us is immense. Even if he doesn’t, the actions of Lyon branch highlight how valuable he is. If we get Asano on board, our reliance on the international committee for spirit coins is ameliorated, if not eliminated entirely.”

“That’s attractive, certainly,” a committee member said. “But in return he wants to put us at odds with the Lyon branch. The European branches are just as strong as the Asian branches. I’m not willing to accept that kind of risk.”

The committee member, Miranda, had once been Annabeth’s counterpart at the Melbourne branch. Her overly-aggressive methodology was viewed as a problem but her political connections made getting rid of her less than easy. Instead, she was promoted to Sydney’s steering committee. This was an increase in authority, but removed her from direct operational control, as well as having the rest of the committee to balance out her inclination for direct action. Since her arrival, she had been at constant loggerheads with Annabeth, to the point of resisting anything she proposed as a default position.

“We have leverage to push the Lyon branch,” Keith said. “They massively violated protocol in sending operatives here. Especially a category three assassin. Who we have in custody, for even more leverage.”

“But we have to answer for the other operatives,” Miranda said. “We have to assume they’re dead.”

“I’m sure they are,” Annabeth said, “but we aren’t responsible for that. They made a move on a politically independent entity, outside of our knowledge and in violation of our territory. If anything, their death in our backyard is another mess the Lyon branch has to answer for.”

“We’d still be making a political enemy of a powerful branch,” Miranda said. “All for someone you admit won’t join our ranks and capitulate to our authority.”

“We wouldn’t be unleashing him on the world,” Annabeth said. “He’s already out there. Check the news. Every behavioural concession we get from him is a win.”

“We can take him in hand forcibly,” Miranda said.

“Go to the holding cells and ask our guest how well that went for him,” Annabeth said. “He came crawling to us just to survive.”

“We know he cares about family,” Miranda said. “We can leverage them.”

“And he can leverage magic itself,” Annabeth countered. “What happens when he starts a national tour of children’s hospitals and talk shows? Are you going to threaten the family of the guy curing adorable kids of leukaemia?”

“Then we act directly,” Miranda said. “If we take him alive, we can extract his resources. The Lyon branch clearly think he’s valuable enough, even unwilling, to take the risks they took.”

“Are you suggesting we kidnap and torture him?”

“Of course not. He’s already threatened the secrecy of magic and left a trail of bodies behind him,” Miranda said. “Bringing him in is our responsibility.”

“Miranda,” Keith said. “No one at this table believes you want to bring him in out of duty. Let’s at least be honest with one another.”

\*\*\*

While Jason had added enough extra materials to the cloud flask to have the interior of the adaptive form mask itself as thoroughly as the exterior, he declined to have it do so. One thing he had missed since reviving was the luxurious comfort of cloud furniture. As they boarded, the sides of the vehicle extended out to create interior space, like an ordinary, high-end motorhome.

Vermillion frowned oddly as he stepped inside. Jason realised why as he followed, immediately feeling better about the exorbitant resource cost of the vortex accumulator.

- 
- You have entered a region of normalised magic. Your recovery rates will remain at normal levels without spirit coin consumption.
- 

The interior of the motorhome was a mansion on wheels; two levels of opulence plus a roof deck on top. There weren’t stairs, but an elevating platform moving between the three levels.

“Bro, your magic RV has an elevator.”

On the lower floor was a luxurious lounge, bar and kitchen and dining area, all surprisingly roomy once the walls were extended. The level above had a main bedroom with a sprawling bed, plus a second one with single beds and a bathroom. It also had the driving station at the front, which felt more like the cockpit of a spaceship, looking out through the curved glass oval. The roof deck had comfortable seating and another bar.

Jason had a large amount of control over the interior, able to reconfigure entire rooms. The four explored the vehicle, Jason relishing the chance to introduce the others to the luxuriant joys of cloud furniture. The interior was mostly cloud white but with embellishments in glorious sunset colours of orange, gold, blue, red and purple.

“It feels like I’m in the womb,” Taika said happily from his cloud chair. “Except there’s a bar. It’s not easy finding chairs that are comfy for someone my size.”

“Don’t drink anything from the bar,” Jason warned him. “It’s magic-infused alcohol. It’ll probably kill you.”

“Even your booze is magic?” Taika asked. “That’s hardcore.”

Once the cloud flask had been ranked up to bronze, Jason had been able to store things in the cloud constructs even when it was in the flask. He didn’t have the chance to stock up on amenities, since he had ranked it up in the astral space. It had some drinks his team had used to celebrate their rank ups, but mostly just lower-value loot that was stored in the motorhome’s discreet storage spaces. They themselves were dimensional spaces that could be contained within a dimensional space when the cloud construct was stored in the flask, which had excited Clive immensely. It was a feature only something as sophisticated as the cloud flask was capable of.

“This is nice,” Vermillion said. “Really nice, but why aren’t you just teleporting?”

“A few reasons,” Jason said. “For one, I’ve been hankering to test this thing out for a while. For another, things have been chaos over the last few days.”

“That’s a severe understatement,” Hiro said.

“Exactly, Uncle Hiro,” Jason said. “Some luxurious, uninterrupted hours on the road is a chance to give you a proper explanation of what happened to me and how we ended up where we are. So, let’s get going, yeah? Shade, get behind the wheel. You can drive this thing right?”

“I am certain I can manage, Mr Asano.”

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Despite what the other organisations believed, there was a peak leadership structure that existed within the Engineers of Ascension. It had been quietly making preparations for years and a group of the top leadership were meeting in an office in New York City. There

were four of them, two men and two women, each in an immaculate suit. They were sitting at a conference table, watching footage of the Sydney tollway shoot out, intercut with images from phone footage of the Starlight Rider and coverage of the hospital miracle.

“This man threatens our agenda,” Mr North said. “We cannot allow him to beat us to the punch.”

“Do we kill him?” Mrs West asked.

“He’s an unknown factor,” Mr East said. “Too much could go wrong. The better response is to accelerate the timetable.”

“That will still take months,” Mrs West said. “What about a more immediate response?”

“The Network will not allow these public displays to continue,” Mrs South said. “We keep our hands clean and allow them to deal with it.”

“Agreed,” Mr East said. “I formally propose we move up the timetable. All in favour?”

## Chapter 289

### Hegemons

The magical motorhome made its way north along the coast. On the bottom floor, the windows had turned opaque as Taika, Hiro and Vermillion watched some of Jason's earliest recordings on a hologram-like recording crystal projector. Jason's clean-shaven, iron-rank appearance was somewhat different to his currant visage.

"What's going on with your Nephew's chin, boss?"

Vermillion sensed an unusual surge of magic from above. He got up and rode the elevating platform up through a veil of sound-suppressing mist to the middle floor. There, in a room with three single beds, he found Jason's disconcerting magical companion that was a nebula within a floating cloak. It's four disembodied eyes were affixed on the television on the wall, which was playing the old Music Man movie from the sixties. Vermillion had actually seen it during the original cinema run.

He could feel the magical surge coming from the next room and he touched the orange patch of mist on the white wall, next to the door. The mist door dissipated, allowing him access.

Jason was sat cross-legged on a large bed. There was an amber light shining from within his body, just dimming as Vermillion entered. It was clearly the source of the magic as he sensed the surge dim with it.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," Jason said. "Just consolidating the gains from my recent fights."

"I don't suppose you'd care to tell me how essence magicians get stronger?"

"You, I'd tell," Jason said. "The Cabal, though, they have to pay for the good stuff."

"I think they know already," Vermillion said. "Institutionally, I've found that we overvalue secrets as a commodity. Maybe you could answer another question."

"Sure," Jason said.

"Why is a whatever your friend is watching The Music Man?"

"Gordon likes old movies," Jason said. "Mostly family movies and musicals. I have no idea what he gets out of them."

"Gordon?"

"That's his name."

"His name's Gordon."

"Yep."

"You live an odd life, Jason."

“You have no idea,” Jason said with a laugh.

“Did your magical recreational vehicle come with the television installed?”

“Are you familiar with quintessence?” Jason asked.

“No.”

Jason plucked one that looked like a sapphire from his inventory and tossed it to Vermillion.

“I’ve seen these,” Vermillion said, peering at it closely. “We call them affinity gems. I’m pretty sure the Network is the main supplier.”

“Well, I collected a truckload of them where I’ve been. Since the magic flask that makes this vehicle can absorb items to gain new functions, at some point I just started shovelling in the low-rank stuff to see what happened. I’m still figuring out all the utility options, like the crystal recording projector you were watching downstairs.”

“You might want to keep quiet about this thing,” Vermillion said. “People will come after you for this alone.”

“It won’t do them any good,” Jason said. “It’s bound to me and me alone. I don’t suppose people will believe me if I tell them that, though, will they?”

“No,” Vermillion chuckled.

“What do you think of these paintings?” Jason asked, gesturing at the wall behind Vermillion.

Vermillion turned to examine them, hanging side by side on the wall. He could immediately tell that the artist was the same and the brushwork seemed familiar, confirmed when he checked the signature in the corner.

“This is by Dawn,” he said. “An unusual new artist. Polarising, enigmatic.”

“You’re know her work?” Jason asked.

“A passing familiarity. When you get to my age, you develop a variety of interests, and art is timeless.”

He more closely examined the first painting, which showed two planets. At first glance, they both seemed to be Earth. Then he noticed that one had an accurate representation of the continents, while the other was slightly, but noticeably off. In between the two planets, against a dark void, were four pillars.

The leftmost was filled with indistinct dark shapes and bright stars. The next depicted a grotesque, Lovecraftian mass of monstrous leeches with rings of lamprey teeth. The third was dark but contained an eye-like nebula, immediately making him think of the entity in the next room. The last was similar to the first with its dark and indistinct shapes, but without the stars shining within.



He turned his attention to the second picture, which he realised depicted the planet from the first picture with the distorted versions of Earth's continents. Orbiting the planet were a swarm of strange, floating cities. They ranged in style from ancient, with castles built of stone, through industrial age to modern and even sleekly futuristic. There was a nameplate in the frame giving the painting's name.

"The Invasion of Pallimustus," he read. "A lot of her critics have dismissed her work as fantasy kitsch because of works like this."

"I don't think she's painting for art critics," Jason said. "Do you know how long she's been working?"

"I think her works first appeared around a year ago. A year and a half, maybe."

"I need to find this woman."

"I can make some inquiries, although she's famously reclusive."

"I'd appreciate that."

Vermillion's gaze went back to the first image and the pillar that reminded him of Gordon. Then he glanced at the first pillar of darkness and stars. His thoughts drifted back to Jason's spectacular demolition of the Blood Riders and his startling appearance as he did so. If the first pillar represented Jason, then, and the third Gordon, Shade would fit the dark column at the end. That left the most horrifying of the four, with the mass of toothy leeches.

"Do you have a third mysterious companion?" Vermillion asked.

"Colin," Jason said. "He took a hit when that category three came after me, so he's resting up."

Vermillion turned from the painting to look at Jason.

"Mind if I sit?"

The cloud bed shrank into an armchair and another one rose up under Vermillion.

"That's handy," Vermillion said, settling into the chair. "So, you fought a category three essence magician."

"Yeah, but he was crap. Last time I fought one, it took my whole team and we barely managed. I almost took this guy down solo. If he was even halfway decent he would have kicked the snot out of me."

"If you get the chance, will you kill him?"

"No," Jason said. "As long as people come at me and not my family, I'm not going to hold grudges."

"That's good," Vermillion said. "You killed the others, though. The ones that took you away."

“I could have just gotten away. But as I told my uncle, some secrets are dangerous to learn, and they learned one of mine.”

“I see,” Vermillion said.

“What is it you’re working up to?” Jason asked.

Vermillion nodded to himself.

“I watched you handle those bikers. You would have done the same to the EOA muscle in my cafe, right?”

“They came after me.”

“And you would have killed them, just like the bikers. I haven’t known you long, Jason, but I’ve seen people like you before. I’ve been where you are.”

“You have not been where I’ve been.”

“No? Drenched in battle? Possessed of powers that make you a danger, yet people keep coming, no matter how many you put down. Sound familiar?”

“A little,” Jason conceded.

“I understand where you are, Jason, and I’d like to give you some advice. But I also understand that we don’t know each other well and it will probably come across as patronising.”

“You know what?” Jason said. “Last time I switched worlds and friends gave me good advice, I was stupid enough to think I knew better. If you have some words of wisdom, I’m willing to at least listen.”

“Alright,” Vermillion said. “You need to stop killing people.”

“I know,” Jason said.

“No, you don’t,” Vermillion said. “You tell yourself that you do, but there’s always a good reason to kill the next guy that comes along. Maybe you need to stop them from coming back for revenge later. Maybe they’re the kind of bad that the world is better off without. Maybe you need to keep a secret. There’s always a reason, but the real reason is that it’s just easier. Somewhere along the way you lose that revulsion you had for taking a life. But you need that thing, to be a person.”

“You’re saying I’m not a person?”

“I’m saying you won’t be, if you keep down this road you’re on. Take it from someone who already walked it; the further down you go, the harder it is to come back. You need to start choosing not to kill people. Not just when killing them isn’t the right choice but even when leaving them alive is the wrong one. If you can get away with not killing them, even if that comes with a price, then let them live.”

“I’m not some wild killer who can’t stop myself.”

“No? Turn on the news, Jason. It’s been nothing but all the people you killed for days, and they aren’t even the latest people you killed.”

“I’m not good at leaving people alive,” Jason said. “Once the fight starts, my powers aren’t designed to leave survivors.”

“Then that’s all the more reason to avoid fighting altogether. I know hitting back is your instinctive reaction, but you’re not at war. You need to stop dealing with the world like you are.”

Vermillion got up from his chair.

“I’m going to leave you be,” he said. “I’m sorry if I crossed a line. It’s just something I wish someone had told me a long time ago.”

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Jason sat staring at the four columns in the painting. His senses detected no magic, yet it felt like there was something hidden away, like the embedded image in a magic eye poster. He couldn’t shake the feeling that if he could look at it in just the right way then secrets would be revealed.

Eventually he gave up, although only for the moment. He rode the elevating platform up to the roof deck and looked out at the Pacific Ocean. The winter air was cold but his bronze-rank body would not be uncomfortable even in almost any climate that Earth could offer. He would no longer need the bracelet in his inventory that had shielded him from the desert heat during his time in the other world. That said, he would certainly not throw it away, given the sentimental value.

Once again his thoughts turned to the magical world and the friends left behind. He hoped they fared well and that they knew he was gone but not dead. He was troubled by the second painting, the one he had purchased after claiming the first under such odd conditions. The world it depicted was quite obviously the magical one on which his life and very nature had changed forever.

The symbolism was clear and the continents matched up with those on his map ability. Although he was no longer there, he was still able to call up the map of it. Even more, once he had two world maps to access, his inventory had labelled them. One, Earth, and the other Pallimustus, the name marked on the painting. He had never learned the name of the planet while he was there, as the inhabitants all just called it ‘the world.’

He would need to find the artist, Dawn. Whatever connection she had to the other world, it was the closest he had to a clue on how to get back. In the meantime, though, his own world had affairs that needed tending. He had once thought to come home and

resolve old wounds of the heart before leaving again, perhaps forever. Inevitably, life had become more complicated.

He had no idea what the World-Phoenix wanted out of him, and for the moment he didn't care. The revelation that his world was full of magic, weak and thin though it may be meant that he would not be satisfied leaving his family unprepared. If the revelation of magic to the wider world was truly inevitable, then he wanted his family to be ready for the changes to come.

In this regard, dealing with the magical hegemony was an inevitability. The Cabal was the one to which he had the least inherent connection, but they were the group he had the more pleasant encounters with, through Vermillion. One man, however, was not the same as the organisation behind him. This was especially true when, by his own admission, they kept many secrets to which Vermillion himself was not privy.

The Engineers of Ascension represented the closest to Jason's own motivations. They were preparing for the coming changes, which was what Jason wanted for his family, but he was deeply hesitant regarding the group. The strange drone men he met, and the circumstances under which he met them, left him deeply wary of the EOA's methodology and values.

That left the Network. They were the best fit for Jason, being essence users, but he had many well-founded reservations. For one thing, there was the mystery of how they made their members stronger. From his few brief encounters, it seemed that advancing through monster cores was the norm. Annabeth had not infused her aura with cores but she had the anaemic aura of a fresh iron-ranker. He suspected that a set of essences was mandatory for executives of the Network.

He could forgive some of their heavy-handed approach in regards to Jason himself. He had certainly caused some very public trouble, and was even responsible for a number of innocent deaths. While he had never invited the biker attack, he had gotten caught up in his own power trip instead of putting an end to it as quickly and efficiently as possible. People without the power to protect themselves had been the ones to pay the price of that.

From the Network's perspective, he was a powerful and reckless force that had appeared out of nowhere. He had trouble arguing against that assessment and it was not a surprise that they wanted to rein him in. His problem was that there did not appear to be a unified set of values. One branch might be acceptable to work with, while another would try and throw him in a hole.

Annabeth Tilden seemed to be a more or less decent person trying to do a job he had made far from easy. That was a long way from the assassin who attacked him from

ambush. Although ostensibly united, his interrogation of the man who was trying to transport him back to France revealed that the branches were caught up in often deep rivalries, especially across geographical lines.

Each continental zone apparently had rivalries within it, ranging from the friendly to the stark. Across continental boundaries, branches might be even more antagonistic with each other than with the local arms of the other hegemonic powers. The arrival of the assassin and his attempt to take Jason had apparently been as much an attack on the Sydney branch as on Jason himself. This was according to the man he questioned; Jason felt differently on that particular point.

The complicated interplay of the Network's internal factions made Jason wary of becoming involved, but he was choosing to do so for several reasons. One was that the Sydney branch, from what he could tell, seemed decent. He was reserving final judgement until he saw more of how they operated. Another was that an affiliation might stave off some of the other groups who saw Jason as an opportunity rather than a danger. Their inclination to follow the Lyon branch in taking a shot at him might be curtailed by a Network connection.

Most importantly, the Network apparently had access to monsters. Monster cores were coming from somewhere, and Jason had developed a rough hypothesis. Vermillion had already told him that the Network was somehow intercepting monsters. Jason suspected that these monsters, unable to manifest normally, were somehow appearing in astral spaces, which the Network was entering in order to exterminate them. The terrorism readiness exercises would be cover for mobilising against those threats in populated areas as they seized control of apertures that were forming.

Jason had studied enough astral magic to know that regular astral spaces were unlikely to be the culprits. There was such a thing as a proto-astral space, more unstable and short-lived than a regular astral space. He postulated that for some reason, these proto-astral spaces were forming on the border of his world's physical reality with accelerated frequency.

One of the key reasons Jason felt confident about this was one of the many effects of the racial gift evolution he had still neither accepted nor refused.

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- You will be able to directly enter proto-astral spaces coterminous with your location or directly leave a proto-astral space to a coterminous location.
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The power to access those spaces for himself certainly seemed like solid bait for taking the power. Until he better understood the World-Phoenix's motives, however, he still declined to even consider taking the power.

For the moment, his intention was to do exactly what the Network wanted and quietly go away for a while. Once they had some kind of framework for cooperation, things could move forward from there. He had caused the Network a lot of trouble and was not opposed to extending them some of his resources by way of apology. He would not forget, however, that the Network had their own amends to make.

The possibility of cooperation came down to two factors, both related to the Lyon branch. If the locals were willing to stand up for their international counterpart's actions, he was done with them. If they were willing to stand against them on his behalf, though, he was willing to reciprocate that goodwill. The second factor was the related issue of the other outworlder. He needed to know if the locals would help him, remain neutral and stay out of his way or actively obstruct him. This was the crucial element that would determine his relationship with the local branch of the Network.

For the moment, it was time to put that aside. He was on his way home and his sister's birthday was tomorrow. He needed to figure out exactly how to make a grand reappearance.

## Chapter 290

### Guilty Conscience

“How long since you’ve been back?” Jason asked Hiro as the motorhome drew closer to their hometown of Casselton Beach.

“Your memorial service. There wasn’t a body, obviously, so no burial or cremation.”

“The body is just a vessel,” Jason said. “It probably sounds weird, me talking about a soul, but I know more intimately than most.”

“It still...”

Hiro shook his head.

“It still doesn’t seem possible. I mean, you’ve shown me the impossible and I still have trouble believing it.”

“Good,” Jason said. “Don’t go losing your sceptical outlook just because your nephew turned out to be a wizard.”

“See, this doesn’t help,” Hiro said. “You go out of your way to make it seem absurd.”

“It is absurd,” Jason said. “We’re in a magic motorhome made of clouds being driven by the son of Death.”

“The what?”

“Actually, that might be a bridge too far,” Jason said. “There’s still a lot to ease you into. How’s Taika doing?”

“He’s gotten on board weirdly fast,” Hiro said. “His father did me a good turn and I promised to keep Taika out of trouble. Give a good job, make sure he doesn’t get pulled too deep into the life. I have no idea how I’m going to explain all this to his Dad. Have we pulled him into something dangerous?”

“That’s on me,” Jason said. “I’ve been treating this world like the rules are the same as the other one and they’re not. I need to get my head around that before even more people get hurt. I’ve been on a war footing in my head and that needs to stop. If I keep being violent, then I’ll just bring violence down on us all.”

Jason sighed.

“I got you and Taika caught up in my mess. I’ve been telling myself that I’ll do what it takes to keep you safe, but in my head that meant being willing to go further and hit harder than the other guy. I’ve realised that’s less about being willing to do whatever it takes and more about getting caught up in a story I’m telling myself. It’s an ongoing problem I have that always seems to blow back on the people around me rather than myself. A willingness

to do what it takes means that if what it takes is eating some humble pie, I have to be willing to do that.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out,” Hiro said.

“I used to think I was so clever. A natural politician. The reality is, even in a simpler society I was out of my depth and here I’m just flailing, like an angry child with a gun.”

“Maybe going home is what you need,” Hiro said. “Step away from all the magic and madness. Let yourself get grounded for a while. No one brings you down to Earth like family.”

Jason suddenly burst out laughing.

“What?” Hiro asked.

“I just realised that I’m more nervous about seeing my sister than when I had to go see a bunch of gods.”

“What?”

“Oh, yeah; gods are real. Just not local, that I’m aware of. I mean, they could be. I won’t know unless one of them rocks up to say g’day, which puts me in the same boat as everyone else, I guess. I think I might go check in with Taika and see how he’s doing.”

“Wait, gods?” Hiro asked incredulously as Jason wandered toward the elevating platform.

“Don’t feel bad,” Jason said. “Atheism’s a valid position to hold, based on the information you had available. It’s wrong, though. I’ll tell you all about it later.”

Jason rose to the upper level, where Taika and Gordon were sitting in front of the television on the wall.

“The reason it’s the best one is because there’s five of them,” Taika said. “If one man can make a difference, then five people can make five times as much difference.”

“Taika,” Jason said disapprovingly. “Are you introducing Gordon to the wrong Knight Rider?”

“Your magic bus yacht has good internet, bro. Who’s your provider?”

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In winter, Casselton Beach went from sleepy tourist town to outright hibernation. The marina was at only a fraction of capacity, with only a few charter boats still operating, catering to seasonal fishers. With the warmth of spring, wealthy pleasure boats would return as wealthy holidaymakers arrived like bears emerging after their winter slumber.

Jason had hired out a marina berth for his cloud house, much as he had done in Greenstone. Shade drove the motorhome directly onto the water, to the alarm of Taika and



Hiro, but it floated perfectly well. Then Jason ushered everyone off and he pulled out the flask to start the transformation from motorhome to houseboat.

“That’s quite a magic item,” Vermillion said. “Are there many like that... where you’ve been?”

“It’s pretty special, even over there,” Jason said. “I won it in a contest.”

“Like a raffle?”

“Not exactly,” Jason laughed. “Where are you staying?”

“The Cabal bought a place. It turns out there are a lot of expensive homes around here, once you get out of the town proper.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Lots of rich people keep holiday homes here.”

“I have to go see your mother,” Vermillion said.

“You bought it from my Mum?”

“She is the pre-eminent upscale realtor in the Greater Casselton area.”

“Just because it says that on her website doesn’t make it true.”

“The house is close to town, but apparently secluded enough that people won’t notice the donors coming and going.”

“As in blood donors?” Jason asked.

“That’s right,” Vermillion said. “I only need to feed around once a week, unless I get very active. Recruiting locals is not a good idea, so the Cabal will send along one of the people we’ve cultivated for the purpose each week. They get a nice drive and enough money to live on for a month, so they aren’t exactly losing out. They don’t even have to do the driving themselves, since we aren’t going to send them on a road trip woozy from donating. They get a driver.”

“You know, I did check out that club of yours,” Jason said.

“You did? My people didn’t notice.”

“They weren’t meant to,” Jason said. “I wanted to make sure you weren’t lying about not killing people.”

“Where’s the trust?” Vermillion asked.

“I trust,” Jason said, “but I also verify. Tell me your people didn’t run my whole life through a sieve and I’ll apologise.”

“You’re not worth that kind of effort,” Vermillion said.

“Is that right?” Jason asked.

“Yes it is.”

“What’s my mother’s middle name?”

“How would I possibly know that?” Vermillion asked.

Jason looked at him from under raised eyebrows.

“Okay, it’s Marie,” Vermillion admitted. “Can I have my car back, please?”

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“You know, I’m going to be dealing with your mother a lot as well,” Hiro said as they watched Vermillion drive off. “If I’m going to start up a development here, working with her commercial office just makes sense.”

“Is that going to work out?” Jason asked. “As I recall, my mother came down firmly on your mother’s side regarding your vocational choices.”

“Once your grandmother comes around, Cheryl won’t be a problem.”

“And Nanna’s going to come around, is she?”

“She cares more about being right than anything I might have done. The prodigal son contritely returning home having learned his lesson is exactly what she wants.”

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Jason said sceptically.

“You know, we’re both here to make awkward homecomings,” Hiro said. “I’m going to start by going to see Ken.”

“I’m going to wait until tomorrow night and pay Erika a visit,” Jason said. “I’ll wait until her birthday celebration wraps up. It’s falling on a Friday, so she’ll probably be having a party. If you go see dad, he’ll probably drag you along.”

“Yeah,” Hiro said. “To annoy your mother, if nothing else.”

Jason sighed.

“I want to say that I can’t believe they got divorced, but I can.”

“What will you be doing before tomorrow night?” Hiro asked.

“Oh, I have some things to do.”

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Kaito was on his way home when the phone affixed to his dash rang and he tapped the screen to answer.

“Hey, Ames,” he greeting.

“G’day,” Amy said, Kaito recognising the particular brand of weariness in his wife’s voice.

“Council meeting?” he asked.

“They’re all morons,” she said. “Why did I run for mayor again?”

“Because the mayor was a moron.”

“Right. Can I just dissolve the senate and rule with an iron fist?”

“I don’t think the Casselton Regional Council has a senate, Ames.”

“Boo. How are the girls?”

"They've been good," he said.

"You sound weird," Amy said. "You alright?"

"I'm having a... I thought... I don't know. I'm having a weird day."

"Weird how?" she asked.

"I'll tell you about it tonight. I'm on my way home now."

"You should go talk to Erika," she said.

"Maybe I will."

"See if you can talk her into cooking," Amy said.

"Your ulterior motive is revealed," Kaito said. "You know it's her birthday tomorrow."

"Tell her I'll get her TV show a tax break."

"We've told her that before," Kaito said.

"Tell her I'm not lying this time."

"But you are lying this time."

"Of course I am. I can't force that through the budget."

"I'll see what I can do. We're coming up on home; see you tonight, love."

"Love you."

He ended the call and pulled into the driveway of his house. A glance in the mirror showed that he was looking haggard. He looked over the house next door, seeing his sister sitting by the window in her lounge room, typing away on her laptop. He pulled out his phone and called her.

"Hey, brother," Erika greeted, waving through the window. "What's up?"

"Mind if I come over for a cuppa?"

"No worries. I don't need to pick Emi up from football practice for an hour."

Kaito extricated his two daughters from their safety seats, leading Hana by the hand and carrying Jace across the yard and up to the door, where Erika opened it to greet them. Erika brewed some tea while Kaito settled the girls in the lounge. Erika and Kaito then sat in the dining area where they could keep an eye on them.

"What's got you so frazzled, brother? You don't look so good."

"I've been... seeing things. Since this morning. The first time I thought it was a weird reflection, then that I just saw something wrong. I mean, it had to be my imagination but I just kept seeing him, over and over."

"Him?"

"Jason. I went out, late this morning. Some shopping, some chores. Everywhere I go, there he is. I know I'm just seeing things but I can't stop seeing them anyway."

“Well,” Erika said. “Maybe you should talk about this with your wife. See if you can’t figure out some reason you might feel guilty about something.”

“Erika.”

“Don’t ‘Erika’ me. You know what this is, Kaito. Ultimately, it’s better that she ended up with you than Jason, but that was going to be a train wreck in the best case scenario. The way you actually did it? It’s like you found a psychological warfare specialist to devise the most effective way to hurt him, and you never had the chance to make amends for that.”

“He’d never agree to see us.”

“Because he knew that he’d stab you in the face.”

Kaito sighed.

“You really think that she’s better with me than him?” he asked.

“Long term, yeah,” Erika said. “Jason was a lot to deal with. He had a lot of hard edges and he never stopped pushing. I like Amy, I do, but she was always going to get consumed in Jason. But you’re Jason with the hard edges sanded down. You know when to stop.”

“There was no stopping Jason,” Kaito agreed.

“Yes, there was, Kaito. You and Amy stopped him like a speeding car hitting a wall. He was finally starting to get it together when...”

She shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I know you’ve heard this from me before and I don’t mean to go dredging up the past. We all have sins behind us.”

“I just never had the chance to make amends.”

“I hate to break it to you, Kaito, but that isn’t the tragic part.”

“I know, I...”

He was interrupted by his phone.

“It’s Benny,” he said. “I should take this.”

“Go ahead,” she said.

Kaito took the phone into the kitchen. Shortly after, Erika started hearing incredulous sounds coming from Kaito.

“They what? Yellow? Wait, the bad guy from those movies? I’m not coming in if there’s paint fumes. I have the girls with me. Because she’s the frigging mayor, Benny.”

Kaito came out of the kitchen looking disgruntled.

“What happened?” Erika asked.

“Benny’s been maintaining the helicopter in the off season, but he went in today and someone had painted it bright yellow.”

“Someone painted your helicopter?”

“Yeah. They got into the hangar somehow, painted it yellow and wrote the name of the villain from those superhero movies across it. What do superheroes have to do with my helicopter?”

“Are you talking about Thanos?”

“Yeah, the purple one with the weird skin beard.”

Erika erupted into laughter.

## Chapter 291

### Uncommon Mistake

“You should come to your sister’s party tomorrow night instead of just showing up after,” Hiro said.

“Not a good plan,” Jason said. “Ooh, smell that. I missed garlic.”

They were in the kitchen of Jason’s cloud houseboat as Jason prepared an evening meal.

“How much garlic are you putting in there?” Taika asked.

“Sopa de ajo literally means ‘soup of garlic,’ so a lot.”

“It’s a costume party,” Hiro said. “You could come in disguise.”

“Erika does love those,” Jason said. “What would I go as, though? I’m not looking to steal Erika’s thunder on her birthday. I wouldn’t want anyone finding out who I was in the middle of it and causing a huge commotion. It’s not like I packed a Zorro outfit and I’m not running around in the outfit they keep showing on the news.”

“I got you this,” Taika said, putting a shopping bag on the table. He took out a spring-action lightsaber toy. “I went with the red blade because your outfit seemed pretty dark.”

“You think I should go as a lord of the Sith?”

“Bro, you pretty much are a lord of the Sith. You look less evil without the villain beard, though.”

“I needed to shave it for something I was doing today. I’ll grow it back after dinner.”

“You can just grow back hair?” Taika asked.

“I have some magic hair growth ointment.”

“Of course you do,” Hiro said. “So, are you going to go to the party?”

“I’ll think about it,” Jason said. “I would like to see how they’re doing before I come back from the dead.”

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While the meeting with his sister awaited him in the evening, the morning found Jason uncharacteristically restless and nervy. He went through his training routine, including combat training with Shade. Shade had a comprehensive expertise with the Order of the Reaper’s techniques and his ability to generate physical force and create multiple bodies made him a useful instructor.

Jason used his meditation session to settle himself. Afterwards, to keep himself distracted, he decided to undertake a project he’d been thinking about and create a simple but original magical item. The magic theory collection he inherited from Farrah didn’t have

any advanced materials on artifice, the study of magic item creation. It did have some comprehensive, foundational works, however.

Farrah's ritual magic specialty was related to formations and arrays, which had some interdisciplinary crossover with artifice. Formations were permanent or semi-permanent ritual effects, while arrays were formations layered in sequence or even atop one another. The array of ritual effects on the Network's headquarters was beyond Jason's ability to decipher, but he had no doubt that Farrah would have handled it easily.

After Clive's months of tutelage, Jason was able to take in the fundamentals of artifice theory in a few hours. His existing skill book knowledge was incredibly useful in enhancing comprehension, as was his spirit attribute. Improved memory and learning speed were both aspects of spirit attribute enhancement that frequently went overlooked by adventurers. Jason learned of it from Clive, during one of many early attempts to get Jason more engaged with magical theory.

Jason's project was to create a new variation of his throwing darts, the simple magic item he knew best. His plan was to combine some simple magic with materials produced by the chemical and engineering knowledge of his own world.

After plotting out the initial test design, he needed some materials. Some were basic stuff he had taken into the astral space and he had a decent amount of leftover. He'd done a good job of hoarding his limited resources, always prioritising powers over wasting his consumables. Many of the non-magical materials for his project would require a trip to the hardware store.

He left the houseboat and was walking along the pier when he heard someone yell out.

"Kaito!"

Jason turned at the sound of his brother's name, but what he saw was someone jogging along the pier, waving at him. Jason recognised him as Lawrence, one of his high school contemporaries.

"Kaito," Lawrence greeted as he caught up. "Hey, man. I haven't seen you in what? Six years."

"Something like that," Jason said. "How've you been, Lawman?"

Lawrence laughed.

"Lawman," he said, shaking his head. "I haven't heard that in a long time. I'm just back in town selling my old man's boat. You're looking good, man. I've heard you've got, what? Three kids now?"

"Two," Jason said.

“Right. I never picked you for the settling down type. With that Amy girl, too. She did get hot that last year of high school, but hadn’t you left by then? I thought she’d end up with your brother.”

“So did he,” Jason said.

“Oh, you dog,” Lawrence chortled. “I was sorry to hear about your brother, though.”

“Thanks.”

“We should catch a drink while I’m in town.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” Jason said. “Two kids, man. Just getting a good night’s sleep is a win.”

“Yeah, no thanks,” Lawrence said. “This is why I like a nice, clean, child support payment. I haven’t seen any of mine and I’m not going to. I make sure the baby-mamas know better than to let the little filth balls anywhere near me if they want those payments to clear nice and promptly.”

“It sounds like you’ve found the lifestyle that’s right for you,” Jason said.

“Damn right. All it took was a few loans from my dad and I’ve got a thriving business. Alright, I’ll see you around, brother!”

Jason watched with distaste as Lawrence walked away. It felt like the man’s personality somehow left an oily residue.

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Jason went to a hardware store to make some purchases. When he arrived at the one he knew, it turned out to have been replaced by a fish shop. Jason was reminded that the world hadn’t sat still in the six years since he last came home and he had to look up a new hardware store on his phone. He could only find one of the big warehouse chains having presumably squeezed out the local proprietors. At least the large store was able to supply him with the things he was looking for.

After returning home, he didn’t immediately dig into his purchases. He found himself processing having been mistakenly recognised as his brother. It was a little unnerving as it was usually a mistake made only by the deeply racist. For all of Lawrence’s many faults, that was not one of them. Lawrence hadn’t known Jason or his brother well and it had been a long time ago, but it was still startling.

Jason found himself in front of a mirror. Now that he looked, he could see the resemblance. The physique-refining process of going up two ranks had significantly enhanced the family resemblance. His skin was clearer, the chin less pronounced. Jason’s face was still more angular than his brother’s. His mouth moved more easily into a grin than Kaito’s signature, easygoing smile. He flashed that smile in the mirror with the open,



inviting casualness that Kaito naturally exuded. It was something Jason had spent years working to emulate.

Looking at that smile in the mirror, he really did look like his brother. The smile fell away, the sparkling eyes replaced with a cold stare. He frowned unhappily and the mirror dissolved back into cloud-stuff, sinking into the wall.

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“What are you doing?” Hiro asked as he and Taika returned to the houseboat. Jason was on the deck stirring the contents of a large tub with a stick.

“Making a ballistic gel mixture,” Jason said. “I couldn’t get exactly what I was after at the hardware store, but I picked up what should be a good substitute. Once I make some adjustments based on what I found in the internet, anyway. Did you get a good car?”

As Hiro’s last car had not been released from the police due to having been shot a number of times, they had been out procuring a new one. Hiro’s brother, Jason’s father, had driven them to Castle Heads, which was the wealthiest of the small towns making up the Greater Casselton area.

“Wasn’t a problem,” Hiro said.

“That Castle Heads is a fancy town,” Taika said. “It’s all boutique stores and big houses. You don’t see a lot of small towns with European car dealerships.”

“I called in on your grandmother while I was there,” Hiro said.

“Yeah?” Jason said. “How did your Mum respond to you turning over a new leaf?”

“It’s a work in progress,” Hiro said evasively. “Your father wanted to come check out where we were staying. I told him I’d show him around on Sunday, so no getting nervous and backing out on the big reveal.”

“It never crossed my mind,” Jason lied.

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Jason sat on a chair in his room. He’d distracted himself with his project for a while but once again his mind was occupied by the upcoming reunion with his family. If it were just that he’d been away, that was one thing. But even without them thinking he was dead, there was a lot of baggage there.

On first arriving in town, Jason had sent Shade to seek out watch over his sister, his father and his niece. If the Network or anyone else made a move against them, he wanted to be ready to respond. Thus far, he had respected their privacy enough to have Shade keep what he saw to himself.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “Your niece seems likely to become involved in an altercation in the immediate future.”

“Is it Network?”

“Not that I am aware of,” Shade said. “Perhaps you should see for yourself.”

Jason closed his eyes and sank his consciousness, projecting his senses through Shade’s distant body. It was occupying an innocuous shadow on the grounds of Jason’s old school. He immediately spotted his twelve year-old niece, Emi, in the same academy uniform he once wore. She was marching up to a group of boys picking on another student.

“Leave him alone, Bryce,” she said to the obvious ringleader. Bryce was quite a bit larger than her but she positioned herself between him and the boy slinking against the wall in fear. She planted her feet in front of Bryce and tilted her head back to glare up at him.

“Screw off, Emi,” Bryce said.

“Not going to happen, Bryce,” she said,

“Are you looking to get beaten up?”

“Where did you learn to bully people?” she asked. “Eighties movies? Do it online like a regular person.”

“I’m not afraid to hit a girl, Emi.”

Emi smiled at him like he was an idiot.

“The way I see it, Bryce, you have three options. One, you walk away. Spoiler: this is the smart choice. Option two is that you and your friends beat up a girl, which will not go well for you. Option three is a girl beats you up, which will go even worse. So, are you going to back it up or get yourself in more trouble than your daddy can get you out of?”

“You think I’m afraid of you?” Bryce snarled.

“No,” Emi said. “I think you’re afraid of what happens when my mum changes her mind about catering your mum’s party, though. How does your dad normally take it when you stop your mother from getting something she wants. Sorry, step mother. The new one is quite pretty, isn’t she?”

Bryce paled.

“I’m going to let you go this time,” he said, and started to leave. “Count yourself lucky.”

Emi turned her gaze to the boy up against the wall.

“Thanks Emi,” he said miserably.

“Grow some balls, Hunter,” she told him. “Your name literally means someone who kills things.”

Jason withdrew his senses from Shade with a chuckle.

“She hasn’t changed,” he said happily.

“She seems quite intelligent for her age,” Shade said. “I believe I recognised some behavioural traits, there.”

“Yeah, she’s smart like her Mum.”

Jason stood and opened up his inventory to the outfit tabs. His old iron-rank combat robes had significantly more grey than his black bronze-rank one and were distinct enough from the images of the Starlight Rider that he was satisfied. He closed his inventory and went out where Hiro and Taika were watching more of Jason’s interdimensional travel vlog.

“Bro, your friend looks like Ron Perlman from that show with the woman from Terminator 2.”

“Gary? Yeah, he’s a great guy. Where did you put that lightsaber?”

“Still in the kitchen,” Taika said.

“So you’re going to the party?” Hiro asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said.

“I wanted to go too,” Taika said. “I don’t have a costume or know any of your family, though. I just like parties.”

## Chapter 292

### It's Complicated

The naked woman's feet trailed on the floor as she was dragged through concrete halls, not cooperating even enough to stumble along. The closest thing she had to clothing was the collar around her neck. They only used category two guards for her, which tied up some of their most valuable personnel. After what she did to the category ones in her first escape attempt, though, it was a necessary allocation of resources. They dumped her in a room that was a plain concrete cube. They moved her around a lot, never anywhere better.

The magical array securing the complex had been engraved right into the concrete. Every door was magically locked, which meant that the collared inmates would be unable to open them, even if they had the chance. Her captors were unconcerned about letting the inmates see it, since they were all collared and unable to so much as explore the array with their mystical senses, let alone grasp their function.

They were trying to keep her on edge, never giving her anything reliable or consistent, even in the miserable conditions. Sometimes there was a steel cot with no bedding, other times a plain mattress on the floor. She was never left in the dark and her sleep never went uninterrupted by blasting music or being hosed down with water. They knew she could handle the wet and the cold, denying her bed, blanket or clothes. All she wore was the suppression collar.

The only exception were brief interludes where she was given a warm bed and uninterrupted rest. These brief interludes were fleeting promises of what capitulation could offer.

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Two men watched her through a security monitor. Adrien was older, his stern features unflinching as he observed the woman on the screen. Michel was younger and visibly uncomfortable.

"We don't even know if she can understand what we're saying to her," Michel said.

"She understands," Adrien responded without turning his gaze from the monitor. He had no need to look to sense his subordinate's distaste for the methodology being employed.

"This isn't working," Michel said.

“She’s strong,” Adrien said, “but that’s good for us. The impediment is hope. It’s only been a few days and she still thinks there is something other than surrender. In time, the hope will die.”

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In her concrete box she was biding her time, reserving her strength. Her collar-suppressed senses were unable to explore the magic engraved into the walls and floors and ceilings. Instead, as they dragged her through the hallways that made up the concrete warren, she mapped the engravings with her eyes the same way she mapped the layout.

Her escape attempts were never the earnest attempts to break free that her captors believed. She had let them think she was turned around in the rat nest of subterranean tunnels. It never occurred to them that her understanding of ritual emplacements was sufficient to grasp their function from visual inspection alone. Each escape attempt, a seeming scramble to find a path out, was actually to get eyes on crucial elements of the magic array that her captors had not led her past themselves.

Just as she plotted out the layout of the complex in her head, she plotted out the workings of the magical array. She was approaching the point where she would understand enough of it to extrapolate the rest, after which point it became a matter how to turn it to her own ends. In the meantime, she would endure whatever indignities they chose to inflict.

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Erika put her phone away.

“Mum sent her apologies,” she said, leaning into her husband, Ian. “Via text.”

The party was in full swing as people swarmed in, out and around their house. There were two barbecues roaring in the gazebo, which also contained the beer fridge. Eskies scattered about contained even more booze, as no one got to touch Erika’s kitchen fridge.

She was dressed as the Riddler, complete with green bowler hat. The long, green coat covered in question marks helped with the winter cold, although the roaring barbecues kept the gazebo toasty and there was a fire pot on the patio.

“It’s probably for the best,” Ian said, lifting off her green bowler hat to kiss the top of her head. He was dressed as a pirate.

“Your dad would be enough to set her off,” Ian said, “but he brought his brother with him too. I think he was trying to cause trouble.”

“Yeah,” she wearily agreed.

“Look at it this way,” Ian said. “Emi is staying at Ruby’s house, your mum isn’t here to get in a fight with your dad. You have two dozen people here who love you and all your

potential friction points are gone. You can just have a drink, and then another drink and have a nice time.”

“How do you always know what to say?” she asked.

“Well, you’re smarter than me, so I just wait for you to get tired and then be as supportive as possible.”

“You’re a sly one, Ian Evans,” she said.

“I had to be, to get the best woman in the world to agree to marry me.”

“Charmer.”

“Sadly, she died and I had to settle, so you lucked into all this,” he said, gesturing up and down his body. She flicked him on the nose.

“Ow!”

They started making their way around the guests, Erika receiving birthday congratulations as she checked out the various costumes. Most were store-bought or minimal effort and she felt a longing for her big parties in Melbourne. On balance, though, she liked where she was. The costumes might have been better in Melbourne but she preferred the people inside them here. Old friends and family were better than people looking for networking opportunities.

“Greg’s done well,” Ian pointed out.

“Oh, that’s an impressive Iron Man outfit,” she said. “That’s Greg in there?”

“Yep.”

“That must have taken him weeks.”

“He’s very lonely,” Ian said.

“Just because he can spend so much time on an impressive costume, that doesn’t mean he’s lonely,” Erika said.

“Must be a coincidence, then,” Ian said.

“You’re so bad,” Erika scolded.

“Who’s that in the Sith outfit?”

“Not sure,” Erika said. “The lightsaber’s a bit naff, but the rest of the outfit is incredible. That cloak seems really spooky.”

“There is something about it, isn’t there?” Ian said. “Shall we pop over and say, g’day? See who’s under there?”

They made their way in that direction but the person somehow slipped away unnoticed.

“Did you see him go?” Erika asked as they arrived at the spot he’d been standing in.

“No,” Ian said, looking about in confused. “I could swear I was looking right at him, too.”

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Jason spent most of the party in the shadows, using a combination of his cloak and subtle aura projection to make people overlook him. He watched his sister and her husband, glued to one another the entire night. He watched his father, Ken, who brought Hiro but left early. He went next door to watch his grandchildren while their parents joined the party.

Kaito was wearing a pale suit and pastel shirt. Just as Jason had rejected his mother’s attempts to impart Japanese culture, Kaito had rejected their father’s attempts to impart pop culture. Jason observed that his brother’s grasp of classic pop-cultural knowledge still appeared to begin and end with Miami Vice. Kaito’s wife, Amy, was dressed as the fourth Doctor Who. This permitted her a long coat and longer scarf to hold off the winter chill.

Amy had wavy brown hair and fair skin. She was pretty, but only by Earth standards; compared to the supernaturally beautiful women of the other world, she was rather plain. Nonetheless, Jason was stopped dead as she walked into view. Feelings he had convinced himself were long dead surged up within him.

Jason and Amy, the girl next door, had been best friends going back as far as Jason could remember. They were inseparable growing up and careened together into the confused hormones of adolescence. She had a crush on Kaito from an early age, which only complicated Jason’s already complex feelings toward his brother.

As she had matured and moved past Kaito’s disinterest, she had eventually come to reciprocate Jason’s feelings. It was only years after it came crashing down that Jason came to accept that he had been the one pushing their relationship in that direction. He realised that she went along as much to avoid losing him altogether as anything else. If they had been older and wiser, they both might have handled things better. He certainly wouldn’t have leveraged their friendship the way he had, a shame he carried to the present day.

It was the end of their first semester of university when things came to a head. They had both moved to Melbourne to study, him at the University of Melbourne and her at La Trobe. She returned home for the semester break, while Jason stayed in Melbourne to revel in his newfound freedom.

Jason was unsure exactly what happened between her and Kaito during that semester break and had no interest in learning more. The fallout had been bad enough,

with Jason dropping out but staying in Melbourne, while Amy transferred to a university in Sydney.

Aside from one disastrous trip home in the immediate aftermath, Jason had not returned to his hometown until now. He watched his brother and sister in law from the shadows, unseen.

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Erika and Ian looked for the man in the strange cloak, asking their guests if they knew who it was, but no one could tell them and he wasn't seen again as the party wound down. In the aftermath, Erika stood in the lounge room, taking stock of the mess. She tiredly rubbed the back of her neck and when she looked up, suddenly the man in the cloak was standing at the far end of the room.

"You kept vanishing on us," Erika said.

He hit the spring action on his plastic lightsaber.

"The dark side of the force is a pathway to abilities that some would consider... unnatural."

Erika found the voice familiar, but couldn't place it.

"The party's over and it's time to go home," she said. "Who are you?"

Jason pushed back the hood of his magical cloak.

"Hello, Eri."

Erika stood stunned as Jason waited, not saying any more as she stared at him, wide-eyed. She took one hesitating step forward, then another, before hurriedly shuffling across the room.

"Jason?" she asked, her voice soft as if afraid that to speak too loud would scare him off.

"G'day," he said with a warm smile.

Her hands went up, unsure whether to hug him or grab him or just poke him to see if he was real.

"How?" she whispered.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "There'll be plenty of time for explanations."

Her eyes searched his face, as if it held the answers to questions plaguing her for a year and a half. It was not quite the same face she remembered. She took in the beard, the two small scars. The eyes were the same, dark and penetrating. So was the vaguely smug, perpetual half-smirk.

"Where the hell were you, you frigging asshole?" she asked, throwing herself into him and embracing him in a fierce hug. His body felt different.



“Have you been working out?” she asked.

He chuckled, returning the hug.

“Work keeps me fit,” he said.

They stood in the lounge, Erika clinging to him like she was afraid he’d disappear again. Ian’s slightly inebriated, sing-song voice came drifting in from the hall.

“Erika... who’s ready to walk the plank?”

He walked into the room with a plastic cutlass on one hand and a bottle of rum in the other, wearing only some pirate-themed boxer shorts and a tricorn hat. He spotted his wife hugging the man in the dark cloak.

“What the... Jason?”

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“What the hell kind of answer is ‘it’s complicated,’” Erika asked.

“A complicated one,” Jason said. “I’m going to tell you everything, I will. It’s just has to come in stages.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because some things you need to see for yourself before you can accept them,” Jason said.

Jason sat across from Ian and Erika at their dining table. Ian had made a quick trip to obtain pants, while Erika held Jason’s hand across the table, as if afraid he’d make a break for it.

“You expect me to just accept that?” Erika asked. “I knew there was something shady about what happened. I was looking into it for months. There was some kind of crazy cover up...”

“I know,” Jason said.

“You know? But you let me keep thinking you were dead?”

“I didn’t know then,” Jason said. “I had no say in what happened. I only got back a week ago and I’ve been playing catch up.”

“You’ve been here a week? Back from where?”

Jason sighed.

“Alright. I’ll give you the broad strokes, but you probably won’t believe me. When you just lay it out, it comes across as quite ridiculous.”

“Compared to a conspiracy where I had to back off instead of getting murdered?”

Jason’s face took on a sudden savagery unlike anything she had ever seen from him in the past.

“Who threatened you?” he asked, his voice full of dark promise.

"I was looking into it with this cop, back in Melbourne," Erika said. "He pretty much torpedoed his career trying to help me. He finally told me to back off because people who dug too hard were turning up dead. I know that sounds like some crazy conspiracy."

"No," Jason said. "I'm pretty sure I know who that was. Broadly speaking. I'm sorry you've been caught up in all this."

"In all what? Seriously, Jason. You fake your death and vanish? What's going on?"

"I didn't fake my death, Eri. Look, this is going to sound insane, even by murderous conspirator standards. It started when I got caught up with this... let's call him a fringe religious extremist. He never intended to get me involved, it just happened by accident. Next thing I know, I'm a very long way from home, with no way back."

"You couldn't pick up a phone?"

"No," Jason said. "No phone, no internet, no radio."

"Where were you? The Sahara desert?"

"No, the Kalahari."

"What?"

"It's further south."

"I know where the Kalahari desert is, Jason. You're telling me you've been in Africa this whole time?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't think to tell anyone when you left?"

"I didn't leave, Erika. I was taken."

"You were kidnapped?"

"Not on purpose, but essentially, yeah."

"To Africa."

"More or less."

"More or less? You know they have phones in Africa."

"Not where I was. That would be the less."

"You couldn't go somewhere there was one?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"It's complicated."

Erika let out a groan.

"What happened to your apartment?" she asked. "You'd better not say gas leak."

"It wasn't a gas leak. I'll tell you all about it, but not tonight."

"Why not?"

"I don't think you want me to say," he said.

She groaned again.

"You look different," she said. "You sound different."

"Part of my training," Jason said. "I do a thing with my breathing that makes my voice different."

"I like it," Ian said. "It's deeper, with a little hint of reverb. It's sexy."

"Thanks," Jason said brightly.

"How I can be sure it's even you?" Erika asked.

"Because you want to punch me in the face," Jason said. "You know that feeling."

"You're right," she said. "I do want to punch you in the face. How about you keep telling us your ridiculous story instead."

"Alright, so this guy took me by accident. I... managed to get away, but it turns out he has a whole family of nutjobs and they catch me immediately. That was when I met these other people they caught, and these people were private security contractors. They'd been hired to look into this crazy family living out in the desert and got themselves caught."

"Private security contractors?" Ian asked. "You mean mercenaries?"

"Whatever you want to call them," Jason said. "Mostly they work for the local authorities. They helped me get out of the situation I was in and recruited me."

"They recruited you to be a mercenary?" Erika asked.

"Yes."

"You."

"Yes."

"Did they mistake you for someone else?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"This is not helping my self-esteem, Eri."

"Your self-esteem doesn't need it. You're telling me you're a mercenary?"

"Not right now," Jason said. "It was the only way we could think of that might get me a way home. These people, they trained me up over a few months. They became my friends."

"They taught you to shoot people?"

"I'm more of a knife guy."

"Oh, you're a knife guy," Erika said lightly. "ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR GODDAMN MIND?"

"I warned you it would come across as ridiculous," Jason said.

“You weren’t wrong,” Erika said, swiping the bottle of rum from her husband and taking a swig.”

“Alright, go on,” she said.

“So, I worked this job for a while until I stumbled into a way back home. That was a week ago. I’ve been staying with uncle Hiro while I get a handle on everything.”

“Uncle Hiro knows?”

“Yeah. It’s just him and you two. No one else, yet. Not from the family, anyway.”

“This is a lot to take in, Jason,” Erika said.

“I know. It’s only going to get worse once we start going through the details.”

“Maybe we just leave that for tonight” Ian interjected. “How about we just be happy that Jason has come back to us.”

“That would be nice,” Jason said. “I’m going to need your support when it comes to Mum and Dad, Eri. And Kaito.”

“Oh, carp,” Erika said. “That’s going to be a huge mess.”

“Yep,” Jason agreed. She squeezed his hand.

“Are you still saying carp instead of crap.”

“Sometimes,” she said. “Carp is worse than crap.”

“You’re a chef,” Jason said. “Show some professionalism.”

“No. Carp is the worst.”

“And people say I’m weird,” Jason said.

“You came back from the dead claiming to be a knife mercenary,” Erika exclaimed. “Knife mercenaries and coming back from the dead aren’t actually things that exist.”

“Yeah,” Jason said awkwardly. “This is going to be an interesting week for you.”

“Do you have somewhere to stay?” Erika asked. “Your old room is a guest room, now. Emi had Kaito’s old room, because it’s the biggest.”

“I have a houseboat at the marina.”

“You’re living on a houseboat?” she asked. “Like the Highlander? TV show Highlander, obviously.”

“That was never a good TV show,” Jason said.

“Let’s be honest; it was never a great movie,” Erika said.

“I liked that movie,” Ian said.

“Me too,” Jason agreed.

“It was a good idea with a middling execution at best. Search your feelings, boys; you know it to be true. A lot of that movie coasted on the soundtrack.”

“Oh, hell yes,” Jason said. “I haven’t heard a Queen song in a year and a half.”

## Chapter 293

### A Big Dose of Normal

Jason returned to Erika's house in the crisp air of the winter Saturday morning. After giving his sister a night to process his sudden return, he was expecting a thorough grilling. He wanted to bring her into the fold as quickly as he could but knew that dumping everything at once was a recipe for disaster. He didn't want her making any mistakes because of something Jason communicated poorly.

Erika had arranged for their parents to come over to let them know about Jason's return, with Kaito and Amy scheduled to arrive after. Jason, Ian and Erika were waiting in the lounge room, in Erika's plush chairs. They weren't cloud furniture, but they were the next best thing. Erika's phone beeped and she checked the text.

"Oh, bloody hell."

"Mum?" Jason asked.

"She's too busy, apparently," Erika said. "She told me that she'd be here. I told her it was important."

"Are you really surprised?" Jason asked.

"It would be nice if she actually did surprise me for once and didn't blow me off," Erika said.

"You should have had Kaito set it up," Jason said. "She'd turn up for that."

"You're right," Erika said. "I didn't think of that."

"We'll stick with the plan," Jason said. "Dad should be here soon, with Uncle Hiro. Then we can bring Kaito and Amy over."

"Are you sure you're alright to see them?" Erika asked. "It's been a lot longer than just since you died. Went away. Oh, carp. I still haven't got my head around this."

"When I was so far away that I didn't have the choice," Jason said, "it put a lot of things into perspective. Mum wasn't wrong that the best thing to do was just accept it, but she really needed to wait a year before giving it. Maybe two. You know she's the one who actually told me about it?"

"You're kidding," Erika said.

"Nope," Jason said. "She always liked Amy but she was with the wrong brother. It kind of felt like she was calling to say that I was never good enough and now she had proof."

"I'm starting to see why you rushed back and hit town like a thunderstorm," Erika said.

“It took me years to move past what happened,” Jason said. “I don’t have to tell you that. You were propping me up the whole time.”

“Are you sure that you have moved past it?” Erika asked.

“Nope,” Jason admitted. “But at this point, staying away hurts more than coming back.”

“So, what do we do about Mum?”

“She’s a busy woman, obviously,” Jason said. “She’ll figure it out eventually.”

“You’re just going to not tell her?”

“Why don’t we tell Kaito that she already knows and let nature take its course?” Jason suggested.

“Isn’t that a little cruel?” Erika asked. “Wait a second. Kaito said he kept seeing you the other day.”

“That was fun,” Jason chuckled. “I shaved for that.”

“He thought he was going crazy.”

“That was the basic plan,” Jason said.

“Did you turn his helicopter into the Thanos copter?”

Jason laughed.

“Did you have to explain it to him?” he asked.

“His wife did.”

Jason smirked.

“Jason, if you just came home for some petty revenge, you may as well have not come,” Erika said.

“Of course I didn’t,” he said. “Petty revenge is just a perk.”

“You did do a pretty good job with the helicopter,” she acknowledged.

“It’s the off season,” Jason said. “It’s not like he’s using it right now and it’s not even proper paint. It’s water soluble and will practically just hose off.”

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“So what’s the big mystery?” Ken asked as he came inside and hugged his daughter. “Hiro was so adamant about me coming along that I thought he was roping me into smoothing things over with your grandmother for him. I told him he was better off asking your Uncle Shiro.”

“No, this is more than that,” Erika said, leading him into the lounge.

“So what’s is going on?” he asked.

“Hello Dad.”

Ken went dead still on hearing Jason's voice behind him. Slowly he turned around, as if fearful of what he would see. His breathing became ragged as he saw Jason standing in the doorway. After a moment of shocked stillness, Ken exploded forward to catch his son in a huge hug. Jason caught the familiar smell of old spice and soil as he returned the hug.

"Is it really you, boy?" Ken asked, not releasing Jason.

"It's me," Jason said.

Ken continued to hold onto Jason like he would never let go.

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Things with Jason's father went very differently than with Erika. She had launched into an interrogation almost immediately, where Ken only wanted to know two things: was Jason alright and was he back to stay. He couldn't stop grinning as his teary eyes drank in the son that had been returned to him.

"I'm not looking to disappear any time soon," Jason assured him. "Not like last time. Things are kind of up in the air right now, professionally, but I'm looking to base myself out of Casselton Beach for at least the near future."

"Professionally?" Erika asked. "You know, I've been going over what you told me yesterday and the more I think about it, the more it comes off as a pile of hot nonsense."

"How much did you tell her?" Hiro asked.

"About what I told you, at first."

"None of the really implausible stuff, then," Hiro said.

"That's not the implausible stuff?" Erika asked, her voice rising an octave.

She turned to Jason and saw that he was looking suddenly nervous.

"They're here," he said.

Shortly thereafter, there was a knock on the door, followed by the sound of it opening.

"G'day," Kaito's voice called out. "We're arrived for the mysterious family meeting."

"Lounge room," Erika called back, glancing at Jason only to realise that he'd vanished like a ghost.

"Do you know who that car outside belongs to?" Amy asked as they came in. "It looks like the Batmobile."

"Hey, Dad," Kaito greeted. "Are you alright?"

"Better than alright," Ken said. "Who has the girls?"

"Mrs Glenn."

"Mrs Glenn," Ken chuckled. "She used to look after you when you were little."

"She's great with the girls," Amy said. "The only concern is that she'll get too attached and flee the country with them."

"You should be safe there," Erika said. "I doubt Mrs Glenn knows a good passport guy."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Amy said. "She seems like a woman with a history."

"So, what's the big mystery?" Kaito asked.

"That would be the owner of the car outside," Erika said. "He seems to have disappeared on us. Again."

"Can you blame me?" Jason asked from the doorway. "I'm nervous and love dramatic entrances."

Amy and Kaito turned around, wide-eyed.

"G'day, Kaito, Ames. How've you been?"

Kaito pointed at Jason.

"You... but... did... how...?"

"I guess we know who painted the helicopter," Amy said. "Not dead, then?"

"I tried it," Jason said. "Wasn't for me."

Despite her light voice and flippant words, Amy's face was stricken, her eyes panning over Jason, cataloguing the changes from the boy she remembered.

"Why don't we all sit down?" Ken suggested.

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After Jason talked the rest of his family through essentially the same thing he told Hiro and Erika, he left them alone in the lounge to digest while he went out into the back yard. It was the same backyard he had growing up, although there was a strange sense of alienation. Part of that was his heightened senses; he was literally looking at his childhood haunt with new eyes.

There were also the details that showed the passage of time. The old, dilapidated fence had been stripped out and replaced, although he guessed his father had done that. The Gazebo had been rebuilt from scratch, clearly to better suit Erika's style of culinary entertaining.

The lemon tree was bigger and showed signs of care. Erika clearly wanted those lemons and had taken the time to foster fruit growth. The flower garden their mother had always insisted she'd find time for was now a herb garden. The patio furniture had been replaced; their mother had purchased for appearance, where Erika and Ian purchased for comfort. The wood and cloth folding chairs were a little daggy, but nice to sit in.

He could sense his family inside the house. Their emotions were practically being shouted through their auras. There was a lot of confusion and no small amount of suspicion, mainly from Erika and Amy. They were the smartest and knew him the best;



they had immediately realised how much he was withholding, not that he made any great attempt to sell his story to them.

The first one to make his way outside to join Jason was Kaito. They each claimed a folding lounge and neither spoke for a long time.

“That was a prick move with my helicopter,” Kaito said, finally breaking the silence.

“You don’t like yellow?” Jason asked.

“Not that. Pulling a prank that my wife had to explain to me. Reminding me of all the things you and her have in common.”

“You’re reading too much into it,” Jason said.

“No I’m not,” Kaito said. “You might have forgotten how much you and I look at the world the same way. We just act differently on what we see.”

“I guess it’s a matter of values,” Jason said.

“Jason, is this one thing going to hang over us for our entire lives?”

“Yeah, brother, it is,” Jason said. “You don’t get to talk to me about prick moves. Remember that one of the things you and Amy have in common is that you worked together to gouge the heart out of my chest and back over it with a school bus.”

“We could have done things better,” Kaito said. “It was always going to be bad, though. I am sorry, Jason.”

“Nobody cares if the guy who stabbed them in the back is sorry, Kaito. They care that they got stabbed in the back.”

“Do you even know how stifled she felt by you?” Kaito asked.

“I realised,” Jason uncomfortably conceded. “Eventually.”

“There was no good way it was going to go.”

“So you decided to go with the worst way, yeah? Thanks for that.”

Kaito sighed and got to his feet.

“I was hoping that you coming back from the dead meant we could, I don’t know. Move past it.”

“We can,” Jason said, also standing. “But I had to say those things, brother. I’ve been waiting six years. I’m probably going to say them again. In fact, I suspect I’ll be kind of an arse about it.”

“As long as you stick around to say them, I’ll listen,” Kaito said, offering his hand. Jason shook it.

“Then I’ll go complain to my wife,” Kaito added.

“Oh, you prick.”

“I’m probably going to be a bit of an arse as well,” Kaito said.

Kaito went back inside, sharing a look with Ken, coming out. Jason hadn't paid a lot of attention to reading emotions through auras and was unable to read the complex interplay between the two men conveyed through that brief glance.

Ken pulled his son into another long hug.

"I'm sorry I didn't stand up to your mother more," he said.

"It's alright, Dad."

"No," Ken said, pulling back to put his hands on Jason's shoulder and look his son in the eyes. "It was my job to hold the family together and I let you be pushed out."

"Dad, none of it was easy and we all made mistakes."

"And it was my job to rise above them, which I didn't."

Ken brushed his fingers over his son's scars, bisecting one eyebrow and leaving a hairless line in his beard.

"Are you alright?" Ken asked softly.

"Honestly?" Jason said. "No."

Jason sat back down, Ken claiming the chair vacated by Kaito.

"I'm not the person I want to be right now," Jason said. "I've done things. Had things done to me. I'm not making great choices right now and I'm hoping that being home will help me to get back some of what I lost along the way."

"This mercenary work," Ken said, broaching the topic like an animal handler trying to catch a wild creature. "You saw fighting?"

"Yeah."

"Did you...?"

"Yeah," Jason said.

"We're here, son. I'm here. Whatever you need."

Jason looked over at his dad.

"You know what I really need?" he asked. "I need a big dose of normal. I need the things I'm cranky about to be that my brother married my ex. I need my problems to be finding out of season chutneys and my mum being disapproving and stand-offish. Hell, I need Koji to come by and hypocritically accuse me of being a banana. Is he still in town?"

"Your cousin? Sure. Shiro bought the caravan park a couple of years ago and left Koji to run the place. Into the ground, mostly."

"Uncle Shiro bought the caravan park? I thought he was all about those high-end developments."

"He is," Ken said.

“Oh,” Jason said. “He’s going to replace the caravan park with a bunch of fancy holiday homes? Try and turn Casselton Beach into the next Castle Heads?”

“Pretty much. Your mother’s snobbish hands are all over the project.”

Jason sighed. “I’m going to have to tell Mum that I’m back.”

“Erika said she was meant to be here,” Ken said. “Of course she’s too busy for her son who came back from the dead.”

“In fairness, she doesn’t know that’s what this was about.”

“Erika said she told her how important it was,” Ken said. “But nothing’s more important than whatever your mother has going on.”

“I’m sorry you and Mum got divorced, Dad. I know that I was the catalyst.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Jason. Your death just brought things that had been building up for a long time into the open.”

Ken got up from the chair.

“I don’t want to just be complaining about your mother the whole time, so I’ll let someone else have their turn.”

“There’ll be time enough,” Jason said. “I’m looking to stick around for a while.”

“Plenty of time to pile on that normal you’re looking for,” Ken said. “And I will, believe me. I love you, son.”

“Love you, Dad.”

Erika came out and claimed the seat next to Jason.

“How was it with Dad?”

“It was good,” Jason said.

“Did he complain about Mum?”

Jason just chuckled.

“You can expect a lot of that,” Erika said.

“Is he okay?”

“None of us were great after you died. He blamed himself for you not coming home after Amy and Kaito. Not as much as he blamed Mum, but still.”

“I wish things hadn’t gone the way it did.”

“And you found a wish-granting genie out in the desert, did you? Or are you just whining about things you can’t change?”

“It wasn’t a genie,” Jason said. “Too far south. Also, real genies don’t grant wishes. They’re pretty much just elementals spirits with an overdeveloped sense of self-importance, from what I hear.”

“Oh look; it’s a stream of utter nonsense spoken with total conviction. You really are back. I still don’t understand why you weren’t able to at least get us word that you were alive.”

“You will,” Jason said. “I’ll tell you everything, and soon.”

“Why not now?”

“Because what I have to tell you isn’t something you can just accept. Especially from the guy spouting utter nonsense with total conviction. Extraordinary claims and extraordinary evidence, you know?”

“You have some extraordinary claims to make?”

“You have no idea. The other thing is that I just want things to be normal. Or as close as I can get. At least for a little while. Before things start becoming strange.”

“You know, Jason,” Erika said, “I’m not sure you’re being vague and ominous enough. Any chance you could crank that up?”

“Ask and ye shall receive, little sister.”

“I didn’t actually mean...”

“Change is coming, be we prepared or not” Jason intoned, leaking a little of his aura to add gravitas. “You’ve heard the stories of the starlight man.”

“You mean that Starlight Rider guy? That’s all that been on the news for days.”

“People are going to look back and realise this was the beginning.”

“The beginning of what? And stop using that voice. You’re just daggy, not creepy.”

“You’ll have to wait until I show you what’s coming,” Jason said in his normal voice.

“You won’t believe me if I just tell you. But change is coming, Eri.”

“What change? What are you talking about?”

“Everything. Everything is going to change. I need to get the family ready for that.”

“Jason, you sound like a crazy person.”

“I’ll sound worse before I’m done. For today, just let it go. We’re just going to go around in circles if you keep hammering away.”

Erika groaned.

“You’re a pain in my arse, you know that? Not even twenty-four hours since you sprang back to life and I’m ready to kill you all over again.”

“It’s been done before.”

“I’ve known you your whole life, Jason. Don’t try to distract me with your nonsense.”

“Just give me some time, Eri, Please.”

“Fine,” she said unhappily. “We need to talk about Emi right now, though. She took her Uncle Jason’s death very hard and me running around playing conspiracy theorist

didn't help. She's finally back in a good place and I don't want her to get off track. You know the academy has her in their advanced program."

"Of course they do," Jason said, smiling. During his most self-pitying moments, his razor-sharp little niece had been a big part of keeping his head, if not above water, then at least not too far below the surface.

"How do you want to tell her?" he asked.

"Come back tonight, for dinner, Erika said. We'll herd the mob out and it can be you, me and Ian when she gets home from her friend's house."

Jason got up from his chair.

"I'll go then," he said. "Text me a time and I'll be here."

"You aren't done yet," Erika said. "There's one more person who hasn't gotten you alone."

Jason turned his gaze toward the house.

"I wasn't sure she'd want to speak with me," he said. "I'm not sure I want to speak with her."

"No one is going to pretend this situation is easy, Jason. Or normal. But she's not going anywhere, so unless you're looking to disappear again, you have to face her sooner or later."

"I'm not going anywhere. I have things to do here."

"Then you and Amy will have to figure out how to be in a room together."

"Alright," Jason said. "Send her out."

## Chapter 294

### Moppet

Jason stood on the patio, looking out at the yard. He sensed her approach but didn't turn around.

"I wasn't sure it was really you," Amy said, talking to his back. "The others don't realise how different you are, yet. There's the physical stuff. The chin, obviously, but the beard hides that a little. The scars. You're a little taller. But that's not all. You move differently. Sit differently. You don't watch your surroundings the same way. It used to be with curiosity but now it's something else. Wariness? At first I thought you might be some kind of impostor, trying to scam the family for money."

"But now you know it's me." Jason said.

"Yes."

Jason turned to face her.

"What clinched it?" he asked.

"You're hurt and angry. You can talk about letting it go and moving on, and you're trying. It's not so easy, though, is it?"

"No," Jason said.

"I am sorry I hurt you Jason."

"I'm sorry you hurt me too. It's one of those things, isn't it? You don't want to but you're just so damn good at it."

"I know you had Erika in Melbourne, but did you have anyone for support while you were away? You don't do so well all on your own, Jason."

"I have friends. Good friends. I had to leave them behind, though. I came back as unexpectedly as I left."

"You never did explain that properly," Amy said. "Or at all. You're lying about Africa."

"Everything I said is accurate."

"That's not the same as telling the truth."

"No it's not," he agreed.

She sighed.

"You know, you weren't the only one to lose the most important relationship in your life."

"I wasn't the one who destroyed it," he said.

"You did your part," she countered. "You're too smart and introspective to not have figured that out by now."

“Leaving me I understand,” he said. “But the way you did it? You knew me better than anyone. You had the knowledge and the tools to hurt me more than anyone else could. And you did.”

“I told myself it had to be a clean cut,” she said. “That if I didn’t put a thorough end to it, then there would always be something there.”

“It wasn’t clean,” Jason said. “And there will always be something there.”

“I know,” she said. “We both hurt one another when that was the opposite of what we wanted. After you died, Kaito and I had a lot of talks about what we did. To you.”

“I wasn’t just hurt, Amy. Take it from some who’s been destroyed more than once; if you wanted thorough, you got exactly what you were after.”

“What happened to you, Jason?”

“You did, remember?”

“I didn’t pay for that crazy car in the drive. Where do you make that kind of money?”

“I’ve been working.”

“As a private security contractor, you said. Did you find some gold out in the desert or something?”

“Actually, yes.”

“You never used to lie to me.”

“I still haven’t.”

“Then why are you still holding back? You can talk about reconciliation all you like, but I see the anger behind those eyes. You’re seething with it.”

Jason turned away again.

“My anger can hurt people, Amy.”

“Really? You’re the Incredible Hulk, now?”

Jason had excellent aura control. There was only one person who could make him lose it enough that it flared out, sending Amy staggering back. He quickly restrained it, knowing he should feel sorrier than he was. He turned to see her looking at him fearfully.

“What was that?” she asked

“I told you my anger can hurt people. Not a metaphor, Amy.”

He strode into the house.

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Keith knocked on the open door as he appeared in the doorway of Annabeth’s office.

“What did I tell you?” he asked.

“They went for it?” Annabeth asked, getting up from behind her desk.

“The committee has tentatively approved opening preliminary negotiations with Asano.”

“Tentative, preliminary negotiations?” Annabeth asked. “You don’t want to qualify that some more?”

“Seriously, Anna,” Keith said with a voice full of weariness. “Learn to take a win.”

“What about Miranda?” Annabeth asked.

“She was a loud voice, but also a solitary one. There’s a reason that no one else spoke up at that meeting.”

“Yeah, because hedging your bets is always a sign of decisive leadership.”

“Good job on the biker spin,” Keith said, firmly changing the subject. “Getting the State Police Commissioner to start talking up a drugs crackdown was a solid move. ‘Drug-fuelled biker frenzy’ is a nice sound bite.”

“Riling up reactionary sentiment about drug use may not be great for society,” Annabeth said, “but it sure helps us right now. The Cabal stepped up on this one and largely cleaned up their own mess. Craig Vermillion really has them convinced that Asano represents an opportunity and they know that their relationship with Asano goes out the window if we set him on a war footing.”

“I think the opportunity he represents is what got us over the top,” Keith said. “When you look at what he did to our French guest, it’s clear that putting him down would cost us. Inversely, that means he’s potentially a treasure-trove.”

“How are things going with the Lyon branch?” Annabeth asked.

“Slowly. They haven’t gone much past admitting they have someone, somewhere in custody. They refuse to say who or why, despite the fact that we know. Did you get anything from the Frenchman?”

“He’s not talking. No surprises there.”

“Can you go harder?” Keith asked.

“I don’t need the International Committee strictures to know not to torture people, Keith. Interrogation works; it just takes time. Right now he’s still waiting for his branch to get him back. Once he realises that we’re not giving him back any time soon, the doubt will start to seep in. When we get him to engage, we’re on the path. We’re not giving him back any time soon, right?”

“Definitely not. We’re milking this debacle for everything we can get. The Lyon branch is actually offering some generous concessions; they really want us to stop asking about their prisoner.”



“Please tell me that the committee isn’t going to give him up without pushing the Lyon branch on their outworlder.”

“They won’t. They’ve realised how important the outworlders are.”

“I’m not sure that they have. That any of us have for that matter. I had my team put together a dossier on everything we have on outworlders. I’ll forward it to you, but the gist is that the Network may be about to go through the largest change since the manifestations started escalating more than a century ago.”

“It’s already happening,” Keith said. “We have kept the lid on this incident, but sooner or later, the secret will break. Once we revealed ourselves to the governments, it was only a matter of time.”

“What happens when it really breaks?” Annabeth asked. “I know there are plans in place.”

“Yes, but you know what they say about plans,” Keith said. “I’m not allowed to share them below the committee level, anyway. That’s true for every branch.”

“You think Miranda is adhering to that?”

“That’s her mistake to make,” Keith said. “You need to focus on cracking the Frenchman and making some kind of agreement with Asano. Obviously he won’t be joining the fold, after what happened.”

“Maybe we can mash our problems together” Annabeth said. “I’m willing to bet that Asano left quite an impression.”

“Does he know Asano got away from his men?” Keith asked.

“Nope.”

“So, if Asano walked in on him, apropos of nothing...”

“It might give him a jolt we can use,” Anna said. “We just have to convince Asano that he can walk in here without us closing a net on him. So, who is going to do the negotiating?”

“You and me, plus a government liaison.”

Anna groaned.

“I know,” Keith said.

“They’ve been pressuring us to send the Frenchman back home. I hate this government so much. There isn’t a foreign interest they don’t fall over themselves to capitulate to. If they saw a rerun of ‘Allo ‘Allo they’d try to smuggle secret plans to the French hidden in a sausage.”

“A rerun of what?” Keith asked.

“Never mind.”

“Also, Gladys,” Keith said. “She pushed her way into it and the committee isn’t willing to push back. They know the Brisbane branch has been trying to poach her again.”

“When are we meeting with Asano, then?” Annabeth asked.

“I’ve already contacted Vermillion,” Keith said. “He’s going to set up a time for us, then we’ll go up the coast.”

“We’re giving him home ground advantage?” Annabeth asked.

“Unless you want to meet him in your kitchen again.”

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Ian and Erika watched out the window as Jason pulled his absurd black sports car into the driveway.

“That’s his car?” Ian asked as the gull wing door on the driver’s side opened vertically and Jason stepped out.

“He’s too young for a mid-life crisis,” Erika said.

“How much do you think it cost?”

“No idea.”

“And he’s a private security contractor?” Ian asked. “I guess shooting brown people for Americans is lucrative. It seems weird. Jason was always so progressive.”

“He was also poor,” Erika said. “I love the boy, but he was always better at holding ideals than living up to them.”

They met Jason at the door and let him in.

“How did you afford that car?” Erika asked without preamble.

“Shooting brown people for Americans,” he said, stepping into the foyer. “Don’t you remember how poor I used be?”

Erika and Ian shared a surprised glance as they went inside. They made their way into the kitchen where Ian started brewing some tea.

“You’re on time,” Erika said to Jason. “Emi isn’t home yet.”

“I know,” Jason said.

“Oh, you do, do you?” Erika asked. “How is that, exactly?”

“Mysteriously,” Jason said. “I’m very mysterious now.”

“Is that so?” Erika asked.

“You think I’m not?”

“I think you should tell us what you were up to all this time,” Erika said. “You have no idea what I went through when I thought you died. People were clearly lying and there was some kind of crazy conspiracy theory cover up. I thought I was going crazy.”

“It did seem like she was going crazy,” Ian agreed.

“You don’t have to worry about that any more,” Jason said. “Now that I’m back, I won’t let anyone treat you that way.”

“I don’t want your protection, Jason,” Erika said. “I want to know what’s going on so I can protect my family for myself.”

“You will,” Jason said. “Consider this a warning, though; once I tell you, there’s no going back.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that when I tell you everything, everything changes. It will upend your most fundamental understandings of the world you live in.”

Erika narrowed her eyes at Jason.

“Did you join a cult?” she asked.

“Of course not.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“I didn’t join a cult, Erika.”

“You are talking a little like someone who joined a cult,” Ian said. “It would make sense that you were gone for so long. Cults like to isolate people from their support networks while the indoctrination takes place.”

“I did not join a cult,” Jason insisted.

“So, you’re still an atheist, then?” Erika asked.

“Not as such,” Jason admitted.

“You joined a cult,” Erika said.

“I didn’t join a cult!”

“It really sounds like you joined a cult,” Erika said.

“I did not join a cult. I’m not an atheist because I met a…”

Jason cut himself off, letting out a frustrated sigh.

“Look, set aside a day,” he said. “Make sure Emi is taken care of and you have no other commitments. I’ll tell you everything. It’ll take some time to go through it and even more to process it. I’m not kidding, Erika. This will change your life.”

“Are you going to explain why you were talking about that starlight person on the news?” Erika asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “I’ll explain it all. Answer every question.”

“Will your cultist friends be there?”

“I should have thrown away that stupid token,” Jason said.

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Erika and Ian watched through the window as Emi was dropped off by her friend's mother. She eyed off the black car in the driveway, walking all the way around it before making her way up to the door.

"Whose car is that?" she asked her parents.

"We have something to talk to you about," Ian told her and the family made their way into the lounge. They sat on the couch, Emi in the middle with a parent on either side.

"You two are acting weird," Emi said. "This is how you told me about Uncle Jason. Did someone die?"

"No," Ian said with a chuckle. "Nothing like that."

"Actually, it's kind of the opposite," Erika said.

"Someone came back to life?" Emi asked.

"Still sharp as a tack," Jason said, appearing in the lounge room doorway. Emi went dead still, staring at him for several seconds. Then she burst forward like she was fired from a rocket, Jason crouching to catch her in a huge hug.

"Hey, moppet," he said. It was a long time before she let him go, after which she stepped back to critically look him over, while holding both of his hands in hers.

"You look different," she said.

"I am different."

"Did you get some work done?" she asked, letting go of a hand to experimentally poke his chin.

"I did not have any work done," came his indignant answer.

"Must be an optical illusion with the beard," she said. "Where did the scars come from?"

"I did some things that certain people didn't like," Jason said. "They did some things that I didn't like."

"They hurt you?"

"Yes."

"Did you hurt them back?"

"They got caught and punished by the local authorities," Jason said.

"Is that your car outside?"

"Would you like a ride? If your parents say it's alright."

Emi turned to look at her parents, who glanced at each other before nodding.

"Not too long," Erika said. "Back in time for dinner."

## Chapter 295

### Always Tell the Truth if You Can Get Away With It

Jason led the uncharacteristically docile child outside and they got into his car. She goggled at the gull wing doors and sleek interior. She was even more startled when the car took off without Jason touching the steering wheel. For a long while they drove in silence, Emi watching Jason contemplatively. She kept one of his hands in a tight grip.

“Why did you go away without telling us?” she asked finally.

“I didn’t get to choose that,” he said.

“We’re you kidnapped?”

“Kind of, yeah.”

“By the people who did that to your face?”

“No,” he said. “That was someone else.”

“Where were you?” she asked.

“Africa.”

“Someone kidnapped you and took you to Africa?”

“Yeah.”

“And you couldn’t contact us in all that time?”

“No.”

“I’m twelve, not an idiot. You expect me to believe that?”

He chuckled.

“You will,” he said. “Once you hear the whole story.”

She lapsed into silence again and it was a little while before she spoke. When she did, her voice was almost a whisper.

“Why did you let me think you were dead?”

He looked at her face as she wiped moisture from her eyes with the back of her hand.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” he said. “If I had the choice, I would never let that happen.”

“Mum went through a crazy conspiracy phase,” Emi said. “Turns out she wasn’t so crazy.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“What aren’t you telling me?” she said.

“Lots of things,” Jason said. “I have a lot to show you.”

“You’re talking around something,” she accused.

Jason turned away from her to look out the window, letting out a sigh.

"I am," he said. "You really want to know?"

"Of course I do."

"Alright," he said. "What if I told you that magic was real?"

"That's nonsense," she said.

"Agreed," Jason said. "What if I told you that it was true anyway?"

"You'd need some compelling proof," Emi said. "The weight of evidence for an extraordinary claim must be proportioned to its strangeness."

"You're quoting Laplace? You couldn't go with Sagan and at least pretend you're not that much smarter than me?"

"Stop dodging, Uncle Jason," she said. "I'm going need an explanation better than magic."

"Or some evidence proportioned to its strangeness, right?"

"If you could prove magic is real, then you'd make millions of dollars and be all over the news."

"I did make millions of dollars and get all over the news," Jason said.

"The news has been nothing but that thing in Sydney for days."

"Yep," Jason agreed.

She narrowed her eyes at him, looking eerily like her mother.

"You're saying that you're the Starlight Angel?" Emi asked.

"I prefer Starlight Rider," Jason said. "Angel comes with connotations I'm not entirely comfortable with."

Shade pulled to a stop and the doors opened. They had driven to Castle Bluff, Shade stopping at the impressive coastal lookout. Jason got out and Emi followed. Although the mid north coast enjoyed mild winters, there was no one else around as the day turned into evening. Emi took his hand and they sat on one of the public benches set up on the lookout. The sun was dropping low behind them, leaving the sky over the Pacific a rich purple.

"Do you believe in magic, Emi?"

"Of course I don't. You got weird, Uncle Jason."

Jason took a deep breath to steel himself.

"I have secrets," he said. "Secrets that I haven't told your parents about, yet. I will, but I think you can handle them a little better than they can. Take a look at my car."

They turned around on the bench to look at the car.

"Pack it up, Shade."

The car exploded into a swirling mass of darkness that swept over and vanished into Jason's shadow. Emi leapt to her feet, staring wildly between Jason and the spot the car vanished from. She walked over, feeling the air with her hands as she stepped cautiously through the space it had just occupied.

When she turned back to Jason, he was draped in his combat robes, his starlight cloak shining and a huge, dark motorcycle next to him. He pushed the hood back off his head to reveal his face.

"You're him," Emi said.

"I'm him," Jason said.

"How?"

"Magic."

"Magic isn't real."

"That's a sensible position to hold in the absence of evidence to the contrary," Jason said.

Emi warily moved closer to him, looking him over. His cloak shone with starlight and there was a sword at his hip. She trailed her fingers over the snakeskin leather of his robes, shaking her head.

"The Starlight Angel was able to heal people," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"Can you heal people?"

"Yes."

"What about Grand Nanna?"

When he had last seen his maternal grandmother, she had been in the early stages of Alzheimer's. Jason's mother had her placed in a hellaciously expensive private care community in Castle Heads.

"Is she still at Garden Shore?" he asked.

Emi nodded.

Jason called up a portal arch, startling Emi once again. He reached out and took her hand.

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Garden Shores was an expensive assisted living community with extensive staff and state of the art medical facilities. A small number of large cottages nestled amongst a sprawling garden of native plants, situated along a picturesque shoreline of craggy rocks. Behind them were various buildings for administration and other services.

In a secluded part of the garden, in a copse of eucalypts, a line of shadow drew its way across the ground. An arch of glossy obsidian rose up from the shadow, the darkness rising up to fill the arch. A short while later, Jason and Emi emerged from the dark arch, her hand grasping his in a rictus grip. She looked around, wide-eyed, before doubling over with nausea.

"It'll pass," Jason said. "Most people throw up, the first go around."

"I'm alright," Emi, standing up straight but looking peaky. The same fortitude that made her adore theme park rides helped her to endure her first taste of dimensional translocation. She turned her gaze back to her surroundings, then immediately began moving off, touching the grass and the trees.

"It's not a holodeck, Emi," Jason said, amusement in his voice. "We're really here."

"That's thirty kilometres," she said.

"Yep."

"Did you drug me?"

"You think I drugged you?"

"Getting dosed with something that makes me suggestible and knocking me out long enough to bring me here is still more plausible than magic powers. A hallucinogenic makes more sense than your car disappearing, and the nausea could be a side effect."

"I went through what you're going through now," Jason said. "The sceptical mind, as it turns out, does not handle the truly outrageous all that well."

"Are you complaining that I'm not more gullible?" she asked.

"Not at all. You're going to experience a lot of strangeness and sorting out the real from the unreal is only going to get harder."

"So why should I believe it wasn't drugs?"

"Think about your own thought processes. They're lucid, clear and analytical. Which is weird, because you're twelve. Shouldn't you be obsessed with a boy band or video games or something?"

"Just because you were basic at twelve doesn't mean the rest of us have to be, Uncle Jason."

"I'm getting owned by someone who can't reach the high shelf. Loving this day."

"Get to the point, Uncle Jason."

"Right, yes. Your thoughts. Lucid, analytical. Admittedly, it's a subjective viewpoint, but if you were dosed up on the kind of drugs that made the impossible possible, then your head shouldn't be as clear as it is."



“You isolated me,” Emi said. “Took away any comparative viewpoints to measure against.”

“That’s a good point,” Jason conceded. “I originally intended to show your parents all this first, but I think that you and I can show them together. You can help me.”

“You really haven’t told Mum and Dad?”

“The only ones from the family who know are you and your Great Uncle Hiro. Come on; let’s go see Nanna. I haven’t been here in a long time, so I’ll need you to tell me which one of these is hers.”

Emi led the way, leading Jason by the hand.

“Mum doesn’t let me see Grand Nanna very often,” Emi said as she looked around to get her bearings in the evening twilight. She didn’t show any nervousness except for the tight grip she kept on his hand. Jason could feel her trepidation at the thought of her great grandmother’s condition through her aura.

“She’s gotten pretty bad,” Emi said. “She’s usually thinks that I’m Mum or Grandma when they were little.”

Jason nodded. He had only seen the early stages, but had kept up an email correspondence when he set off for university. Her emails had become increasingly incoherent over time before stopping altogether. He felt pangs of shame that he had let his bitterness and self-pity stop him from coming back home to see her when she could have used it the most. He wondered if that was why he had brought Emi here, despite the trouble it would inevitably stir up.

“Actually,” Jason said, stopping. “Before we go see Nanna, I should make a phone call.”

Jason’s phone was in the clothes he had switched out for his combat robes to impress his niece with and he had to fish it out of his inventory. As soon as he did, it beeped with messages from his sister.

“Missed a call from your Mum,” Jason said, even as Emi’s phone started to ring. “I’m guessing that’ll be her.”

Emi nodded as she took her phone out, then handed it to Jason.

“Oh, come on,” Jason said.

“You’re the responsible adult,” Emi said.

“Says the girl who’s twelve going on forty,” Jason said, taking the phone. “Erika, hey.”

“It’s time to come back, Jason. Also, did you give me a fake number? When I tried to call you it said your phone was out of area.”

“I think we were going through a tunnel. We’ve got one thing to do before we come back.”

“What tunnel?”

“Oh, here’s that tunnel again.”

“There aren’t any tunnels around here.”

Jason hung up and handed Emi back the phone.

“You’re a bad man,” Emi told him.

“I prefer naughty,” Jason said. “It’s sexier.”

“Uncle Jason, I’m twelve.”

“Sorry about that. I mean, you’ve had the talk, right?”

“Yes. Stop being gross.”

“Sorry.”

He took his own phone and called a number that Craig had provided him.

“Asano?” Annabeth said.

“G’day,” Jason said. “Do you prefer Annabeth or Anna? I’m going to go with Anna. Anna, I’m here with my niece and I thought you’d like a heads up.”

“About your niece?”

“No, about curing my grandmother’s Alzheimer’s. I thought maybe your lot would like to cover it up so it doesn’t make as big a hullabaloo as the last thing.”

Silence came from the other end of the line.

“Anna?”

“Do you have any concept of how many problems I have with what you just said?”

“It sounds like you might want to swear, but I’ve got you on speaker and my niece is twelve, so you probably shouldn’t.”

“What?”

“It’s Garden Shores Assisted Living Community, just outside Castle Heads. Thanks, Anna.”

Jason hung up over the bluster coming from the other end.

“Who was that?” Emi asked.

“You know the Men in Black?” Jason asked. “That was them. Well, the People in Black.”

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They avoided the reception building as Emi led them to the cottage occupied by Jason’s maternal grandmother. Jason had his cloak dimmed down to black and occasionally wrapped it around Emi as a staff member passed them by.

“How did they not see us?” Emi whispered as they watched a pair of orderlies wheel a laundry basket toward the utility building.

“My cloak makes us harder to see in the shadows,” Jason said. “With magic.”

They reached the door and Jason took out a small crystal key, one of the single-use opening devices he made for dealing with normal and iron-rank locks.

“Let’s see if this works,” he said, touching it to the card-reader lock on the door. The key evaporated into the air and red light switched to green and Jason lightly pushed the door open. He glanced at Emi, who was staring at where the key vanished.

“It’s a lot to take in, isn’t it?” he said softly. “Just be thankful that no one is trying to eat you.”

“What?”

“I’ll tell you about it later,” Jason said, leading her inside.

Emi slowed down and Jason accommodated her, still reassuringly holding her hand. Together they moved into the lounge room where they found Jason’s grandmother watching television, glassy-eyed. She didn’t react to their presence at all and Emi shrank behind Jason. He looked down at his niece.

“Once I do this, we’re going to leave immediately, okay? We don’t want to be around to answer questions.”

Emi nodded.

“Are you ready for this?” he asked. She nodded again.

“Are you sure?”

“Come on, Uncle Jason.”

“Alright,” he said. “Here we go.”

He raised an arm in the direction of his grandmother.

*“Feed me your sins.”*

Emi’s eyes turned into round headlights as a feeble red life force emerged from the old woman in the armchair, with unpleasant colours teeming through it. The tainting colours started leaking out in a stream that moved across the room and into Jason’s hand, pouring out of her and into him until the red glow of her life force was clean, even looking a little firmer than before.

- 
- You have cleansed all instances of disease [Alzheimer’s Disease] from [Glenda Pottsworth].
  - You have cleansed all instances of disease [Arthritis] from [Glenda Pottsworth].
  - You have cleansed all instances of disease [Liver Cancer] from [Glenda Pottsworth].

- Your stamina and mana have been replenished.
  - Stamina and mana cannot exceed normal maximum values. Excess stamina and mana are lost.
  - Cleansing afflictions has triggered [Sin Eater]. You have gained an instance of [Resistant] and [Integrity] for each instance of affliction cleansed.
- 

Jason's grandmother looked at him with confused eyes, seeing only a form shrouded in darkness. Jason took out a healing potion, moved forward and tilted her unresisting head back to tip the potion into her mouth. After making sure that she swallowed it, he grabbed Emi's hand and quickly led her outside.

Emi was still dazzled by the magical light show, not resisting as Shade emerged to take his car form and Jason put her in the passenger seat. Jason got behind the wheel but let Shade drive them away. They had been there long enough for Jason's portal ability to come off cooldown but Jason wanted to give Emi the car ride back to process. As it was, he was already regretting letting her see so much so quickly.

"What was that stuff you gave her?" Emi asked, after a long time.

"Healing potion," Jason said. "I took away the Alzheimer's but I have no idea how much damage it did to her brain. I'm not sure how much she'll get back from healing it. I can't be sure what the results will be."

Emi lapsed back into silence, Jason leaving her be.

"What do I tell Mum and Dad where we went?" she asked.

"That we went to Castle Bluff, and then to see Grand Nanna," Jason said. "Always tell the truth if you can get away with it."

## Chapter 296

### Discretion is a Good Idea

Erika had put together a simple dinner of salad, tartiflette and buttermilk pie. Tartiflette was a potato, bacon, onion and cheese casserole that made a great winter warmer. They sat somewhat awkwardly at the table, talking around the topic of Jason's mysterious return to life.

Jason and Erika had grown up with their mother's strict rules about not bringing conflict to the dinner table. While Jason never saw a rule he wouldn't obnoxiously flout just because, it helped him out in this particular instance. He was happy to ask Emi about her life, having been transplanted from Melbourne to Casselton Beach. It was the opposite of his own trajectory.

"I like the weather here," she said. "It rains more in summer than winter, which is weird. That rain we got last week was really heavy, though."

Jason absently wondered if his arrival had somehow impacted the weather patterns, Clive would have been able to figure it out.

"Are you alright Uncle Jason?" Emi asked, reading his expression.

"Yeah," Jason said. "I was just thinking about a friend. I don't know when I'll be able to see him again?"

"Can you not call him because he's in the place you were?"

"Exactly," Jason said.

"So, did you do much cooking while you were away?" Ian asked Jason, diplomatically seeking common ground between the siblings after the tension between Jason and Erika.

"A bit," Jason said. "I got to try a lot of new things, but the ingredients were largely local. That friend I mentioned grew up on an eel farm and taught me a few ways to cook them that aren't awful. Again, the ingredients aren't something I can get my hands on here, but I took notes with some potential substitutes and variations. I'm hoping to find the time to try some things out, now that I'm home. Do you know an eel guy, Eri?"

"I know someone who can sort you out," Erika said. "You know who will be happy your back? Wally."

"Wally! He moved over to the new show with you?"

"He didn't just move to the show, but into town, too. He bought one of those fancy beach cottages."

"He was lucky to pick one up," Jason said. "They almost never go on the market."

"The Green family sold up and Mum gave him an early heads-up."

"That's nice of her," Jason said. "You know, I saw Lawrence Green the other day. He thought I was Kaito."

"Wasn't he quite slimy?" Erika asked. "I went to school with his cousin."

"Still is," Jason said. "If anything, he's even more oily. You could lubricate an engine with his personality."

"Wally's husband bought the coffee shop off old Mrs Russel," Ian said. "You can finally get a good cup of coffee in this town."

"I'll take your word for it," Jason said. "I'm lucky I'm not a coffee drinker, since they didn't have any where I've been staying."

"Just like phones," Erika said.

"Exactly," Jason said. "The tea was crazy good, though. There was this river, running through a valley with all this tea growing up the slopes. I went through there once, not long after I arrived."

"Arrived where, exactly?"

"A place called Greenstone," Jason said. "You'll be able to see it for yourself, soon. I kept a vlog."

"A vlog?" Erika asked. "They don't have radios, but they have the equipment for vlogging?"

"It'll make sense once I explain everything. Did you figure out a day the two of you can both get free? I said you should have someone look out for Emi, but I think she should be involved from the start."

"Tomorrow," Erika said. "If it has to be a whole day, then we can't do it on a weekday and I'm not waiting until next weekend."

"Tomorrow it is," Jason said. Erika narrowed her eyes at him, looking for evasiveness.

"So long as nothing comes up," he added innocently.

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The house boat produced by the cloud flask was more impressive than what it had been at iron-rank, which was already quite luxurious. It was still a far cry from the sprawling wings and towering spires of Emir's cloud palace, but it was still a small floating island, with multiple levels of open deck and tinted wraparound glass. There was even a glass-walled room beneath the waterline.

The rooftop surfaces were covered in solar panels, which Jason could sense drawing in ambient magic like an overactive mana lamp. It left the surrounding ambient magic even more anaemic than normal as the houseboat guzzled it up.

It seemed designed to largely suck the ambient magic down vertically, drawing it down from the air in a great column. Anyone with magical senses would notice it from halfway across town. It was far more draw than the motorhome variant, presumably because it was normalising magic across the larger space of the houseboat.

The decks and interior of the houseboat was littered with lush, green, leafy plants. Jason had largely transplanted them from the jungle astral space, although he had avoided the magical ones. Emir had given Jason a notebook that detailed all his experiments into different kinds of plants with his own cloud flask. It detailed his experiments with different kinds of flora, magical and mundane. It had exhaustive lists of how different plants withstood being stored away in the cloud flask, weathered the sea air or adapted to various climates.

“If you aren’t going with magical plants,” Emir had told him when handing over the notebook, “I’d just give the section on getting the plants installed a read. You can shovel a bunch of earth, water, light and shield quintessence into the cloud flask and any non-magical plants you want will thrive. Once you start looking into magical plants, that’s the time to give it a proper read. There are a lot of quirks you need to be aware of.”

Jason arrived back at the house boat mentally weary but let out a contented sigh as he drank in the sight of it. It was big enough that Jason’s winter arrival proved to be a good thing, with the neighbouring berth available for Jason to rent when the houseboat spilled over into the neighbouring slip.

He stepped onto the lower deck and then made his way inside. The interior was all light woods and white leather, plus tasteful teal embellishments. The cloud constructs could have their interiors and exteriors set to adaptive or grandiose independently and he had the house boat set to full adaptive.

The various surfaces were indistinguishable from actual woods and leathers, courtesy of the materials he had shovelled into it as reference. Along with quintessence, different kinds of magical and mundane woods, stone, metal and fabric had been consumed by the cloud flask. It could dissolve and consume whole blocks of stone, sucking it into the flask.

More than once, Jason had used the flask to remove obstructions as his team explored the astral space. It was a win-win, since generally the obstacle was something sturdy enough that other methodologies would be slower or ineffective. Clive had posited that Emir’s cloud flask had consumed ludicrous quantities of materials and was always encouraging Jason to throw things in.

While he missed the plush comfort of cloud furniture, Jason maintained the houseboat internals in a camouflaged state, with the exception of his own bed. He would

continue that at least until his family were up to speed on magic. While his sister might feel like he was stonewalling, he was even more anxious than her to get everything into the open.

The goal was to resolve everything, if not neatly, then with as little mess as he could manage. Throwing explanations in between meetings with vampires and crime bosses the way he had with Hiro, or getting bystanders caught up like with Taika was precisely what he sought to avoid.

Ideally, that issue would be settled by the time the weekend was over. He was unsure how much his powerful but inexperienced healing would help his Nanna, but it had the potential to cause, as Nanna herself would say, a kerfuffle.

Jason could sense Hiro and Taika watching more of his recording crystals in the media room. Leaving them be, he made his way to the upper deck where he opened a portal arch and entered his spirit vault, the enhanced version of his old inventory ability.

The personal space was apparently different from an ordinary dimensional boundary, like that sealing off an astral space. Unlike that sort of boundary, Jason could maintain his familiars on one side, while he was on the other. This allowed Shade to keep watching his family and the house boat while Jason was safe inside the vault. His familiars were an assuring presence each time he retreated into the spirit vault for meditation.

Since his soul underwent changes after overcoming the star seed, Jason's meditation had taken him to an internal world; a garden of the soul where his abilities were represented by beds of flowers. At bronze rank, that garden had expanded, given them room to grow. Trellises created tunnels of flowers in bold colours of red, white and black, allowing him to walk through the living pathways of his own power.

The boundary of the garden was still the wall surrounding it, a stone facade covering a darker and stranger substance underneath. The facade was increasingly crumbling away, exposing more of the eerie material beneath. It was like darkness itself made substantive. A black hole, frozen and harnessed to build an unassailable boundary, then hidden behind an acceptable face. Compared to the cracked and battered stone, the dark walls beneath promised invulnerability to those within and annihilation to those who attempted to breach it.

In the time since he acquired the spirit vault, he found that it went through a change. The vault took the form of a gazebo of marbled black and white obsidian. It floated in the sky, which was a reflection of the world outside. The first time he had used when it had been dark and raining. During the day the sky was bright with sunlight, but Jason's favourite times were clear sky nights. With no town to cause light pollution, the sky was a



sea of stars. There might be a wisp of cloud, lit up by the light of the moon and he would sit beneath it, meditating in absolute, uninterrupted peace.

Over several meditation sessions, the gazebo had started descending. At first there seemed to be nothing but endless sky below, but slowly the garden appeared. He sensed it before he saw it, after which he then went out to look over the edge and down.

The garden itself was different to his experiences in the past. Instead of dark earth, it rested on dark clouds, heavy with the promise of storms. Slowly the gazebo had descended until it settled in the middle of the garden, in a space that fit it perfectly. Henceforth, every time Jason stepped into the spirit vault, it was already in what was now a sky garden. The line between his internal and external worlds was becoming hard to tell apart.

It was a scary yet exhilarating feeling, like falling, but there was still a sense of disconnect. It made him think of the power the World-Phoenix had offered, uniting body and soul into a merged gestalt. The connection between that feeling and the offered power made him wonder if the World Phoenix had a hand in evolving his inventory power into the spirit vault. Clive had told him that a great astral being shouldn't be able to impact his gift evolutions without his knowledge, but even Clive couldn't be right all the time.

Jason arrived through one of the four arches holding up the gazebo roof. There was an arch for each of his familiars and one for Jason himself. The contents of his inventory still floated in the air, orbiting the space just above the gazebo. He could see them clearly as he left the gazebo to walk around the garden.

Just strolling through the garden was a meditative experience, now. He could even direct the power he was consolidating in specific directions by where he chose to go in the garden, although powers he had been using were easier to promote. He had consolidated the gains of his recent challenges and now all his abilities were at least passed the third of what Clive called the minor thresholds. His most-used abilities, his vision and cloak, had passed the halfway mark of the fifth threshold.

Until he found a new challenge, his abilities would not advance further. He hoped to find that challenge working with the Network, but if the Network decided to become that challenge instead, then so be it.

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Jason spent the night in meditation rather than sleep. The more powerful he became, the less he needed to rely on sleep, although it was never wholly inescapable. Slumber was an intrinsic part of the mortal existence, even for those imbued with mystical power.

Sleep was part of the magical cycles of an essence user, even when their superhuman recovery attribute kept them awake and alert. Going too long without it would increasingly impair their ability to control even the passive magic their body. With a cloud bed to come home to, though, Jason did not begrudge the need for sleep.

Emerging through the archway from his spirit vault the next morning, his phone immediately started beeping. He went through the voice messages; an audio mosaic of his sister narrating events surrounding their Nanna through a series of increasingly angry and erratic messages.

Nanna had somehow switched doctors, without her family – who held her power of attorney – being notified. Her new doctors had whisked her away to the Casselton Regional Hospital, where they were being decidedly less than forthcoming.

In spite of this, and to Jason's surprise, Erika had apparently managed to extract Nanna's medical state from the people he strongly suspected to be the Network's people. Jason's takeaway was that Nanna was lucid, lacking in almost any memory of the last few years and very spotty about the few before that.

Between Jason and Emi's visit to Nanna, Jason's mention of the Starlight Angel that cured people and his ongoing mysteriousness, Erika was putting together things that added up to impossible answers. Her inability to subsequently reach Jason had led to each message exuding more frustration and rage than the last.

He sighed. He knew that curing his Nanna would cause trouble. All he could do was step in and sort it out as best he could. His immediate thought was that Erika would push Emi for information but he immediately dismissed the notion. Putting too much pressure on her daughter was something Erika would never do. Even so, he did want to intervene before she started asking her daughter about their visit with Grand Nanna, though. His intention had never to cause friction between mother and daughter.

"Shade," he said. "Remind me to give you my phone when I go into the spirit vault. You can tell me if I get any important messages."

He made his way into the bar lounge, where Hiro was working on a laptop with headphones on while Taika was on another laptop, talking with his Mum over a video chat. Like her son, she was basically a chocolate wall with a friendly expression. Jason walked up behind Taika and gave his Mum a wave.

"Hello, Mrs Davison."

"Oh, hello, Jason. When are you going to bring my boy back to Sydney so I can meet you in person?"

“Oh, I’m sure we’ll have business there soon enough. Hiro needs to go back into Sydney soon and I’ll probably go along.”

“He’s been showing me around your houseboat, if you can even call it that. It’s more like a palace.”

“Oh, the palace comes in a few years. If I can get the parts. You know, you could come to us. The weather’s very nice here, even in winter.”

“Bro,” Taika complained and Jason chuckled.

“I have to go see my Nanna, Mrs Davison,” Jason said. “You have yourself a lovely day.”

“I will, sweetie.”

Jason tapped Hiro on the shoulder, gesturing for him to follow. Hiro took off his headphones and they went out on the deck.

“You heard about your grandmother?” Hiro asked.

“Yeah.”

“You know, trying to explain to your sister that you’re unavailable because you’re meditating inside a magic archway is not easy.”

“Sorry about that,” Jason said. “I need to bring her in sooner, rather than later. I’d like to do it today, after things are sorted out at the hospital.”

“I would have gone to the hospital, but I figured I’d wait for you. Are you responsible for what happened?”

“You make it sound like a bad thing,” Jason said. “I’m going now, if you want to join me.”

“I will, yeah,” Hiro said.

Jason opened up a portal arch.

“Not by car then?” Hiro asked, looking at the portal warily.

“This is quicker,” Jason said.

“Not that much quicker,” Hiro said.

“Come on, Uncle Hiro.”

Moments later, Jason was looking at a wide-eyed man in one of the men’s toilets at the Greater Casselton Regional Hospital in Castle Heads.

“What?” Jason asked him as the portal sank into the floor and Hiro rushed into one of the stalls. “You’ve never seen two grown men emerge from a magic portal before?”

The man scrambled to escape the bathroom as Hiro emerged, taking some paper hand towel to wet and wipe his face over the sink.

“I hope he washed his hands,” Jason said. “It’s a hospital.”

Hiro gave him a sideways look. "That's what you're worried about?"

"You're right," Jason said. "They have those disinfectant dispensers all over the place. I'm sure it's fine."

"Aren't you worried about that guy telling people?"

"About the two men who appeared in a men's room through a magic portal? Not especially. Would you believe it?"

"What if those men in black guys hear about it? You said they're here, right?"

"The Network? Well, my portal is one of my trump cards, but Craig knows, which means his group knows, which means it isn't really a secret anymore. Plus, I'm pretty sure that's a very valuable ability. It'll show what I have to offer when I sit down to negotiate with the Network. What they'll bring to the table are things like health care for Nanna that's better than money can buy."

"Still," Hiro said. "I have to imagine that discretion is a good idea."

"I can assure you, Mr Asano," Shade said from Jason's shadow, "it is an idea that has been put to him on several occasions. He seems to hold little affection for it."

"Says the guy who turns into a giant, black mid-life crisis," Jason said.

"Through your ability," Shade pointed out.

## Chapter 297

### The Cold Eyes of a Stranger

Erika, Ian and Kaito were gathered in a waiting room with Jason's mother, Cheryl, and her brother, Robert. Emi had been left with Amy and her children. This was something Erika had come to regret, given her increasing suspicions surrounding Jason and the visit Emi had paid to her Grand Nanna the previous evening.

Jason arrived in the waiting room at a stride, Hiro trailing behind. The shocked expressions of his mother and maternal uncle made them look like they'd just been slapped.

"G'day all," Jason said. "That's a nice pantsuit, Mum. Uncle Robbo, it's been a while. Doctors still giving you the run around? I'll go see if I can't give them a kick in the bum."

Erika, Ian and Kaito had all turned to Cheryl who was still looking at Jason like she'd seen a ghost. Jason started marching off again, then stopped and snapped his fingers like he'd just remembered something.

"Oh, yeah," he said, turning and absently pointing a finger at his mother. "Not dead. Obviously. Forgot to say. We can talk in a couple of days; I'm a bit busy at the moment. You know how it is."

He then resumed marching away from his startled family, with Hiro staying behind but Erika quickly trailing after him.

"This is how you let Mum know?" she asked.

"Apparently," Jason said. "She's hard to pin down."

"This is because of how she treated you after, you know."

"I'm not unaware of my own motivations, Erika."

"That's another mess I'll no doubt be left to clean up. Do you ever leave your phone on?"

"I was meditating in an alternate dimension, Eri. The Telstra network doesn't cover that."

"I am not going to let you distract me with your lunacy."

"You say that," Jason said, "but we'll see."

He spotted the ward reception and went over.

"I need to see the doctors for Glenda Pottsworth," he demanded of the nurse there.

"You'll need to wait," he said. "As I told the rather assertive young lady beside you, the doctors will make themselves available when they can."

“Tell the doctors that Jason Asano is about to start poking around and see if that doesn’t free them up,” Jason said, not waiting for a response before walking away.

Erika followed again and pulled him up short.

“You did have something to do with this,” she said.

“Yes,” Jason admitted.

“What the hell is going on, Jason?”

“Look, Emi asked me if I could help Nanna. I wasn’t sure; Alzheimer’s is a tricky one, but I thought maybe I could. I gave it a go and it looks like it worked.”

“Like what worked? What did you do.”

“The doctor’s here,” he said, looking over at a door marked staff only. Moments later they saw a doctor through the glass in the door, who buzzed himself out to join Jason and Erika in the corridor.

“Mr Asano?” the doctor asked. The man had no magic, but Jason had sensed the man’s nervous fear approaching. It seems the Network had told him at least something about Jason.

“Eri, go back and tell the others that we’ll have news soon.”

“If you think I’m leaving you alone for...”

The look Jason turned on her wasn’t backed up by his aura, but the unflinching authority in his gaze made him seem for a moment like a total stranger, taking her aback.

“Tell the others that they’ll be able to see Nanna soon,” he reiterated. “Isn’t that right, doctor?”

Jason didn’t turn away from his sister to ask him, but the man hopped nervously like a raw recruit on a parade ground.

“Of course, Mr Asano.”

Only then did Jason turn to face the man.

“There’s somewhere you can brief me on my grandmother’s condition?”

“Follow me, please.”

He led Jason through the doors, when he suddenly stopped dead when his senses picked up something. It was retracted and hard to sense, but not hard enough. It was unmistakably a silver-rank aura.

Jason turned a look on the doctors that could melt steel, fear crossing their faces.

“I hope you haven’t done something very, very stupid,” Jason snarled.

The increasingly skittish doctor led Jason to a small office that contained the silver-rank aura Jason could sense, leaving him outside the door and scuffling off. Jason was

ready to unleash Colin if these people were foolish enough to try something on as he opened the door.

Inside was a woman with magically perfected looks he had come to expect from silver-rankers. She had shampoo commercial dark hair and flawless, alabaster skin, but Jason was well past the point of being distracted by such beauty. He had kept more than his share of company with beautiful people.

“Jason Asano,” she greeted.

“Random silver-ranker who better not try anything with this many of my family in the building,” he greeted back coldly.

“That’s not my intention at all,” she said. “Take a seat.”

The diminutive office she had appropriated only had space for two to sit with a small desk in between. Trying to dodge Colin in the limited area would be an exercise in futility, which gave him a level of comfort as he took a seat.

“My name is Gladys Williams,” she introduced herself. “Silver-ranker. That’s what you call a category three, right? Based on the spirit coin of that rank?”

“Yes,” Jason answered coolly.

“You really aren’t worried about the power disparity, are you?” she asked. “Most cat twos get real nervous this close to a three.”

“You wouldn’t be the first category three that I’ve killed.”

“I’m a healer, you know. I can counteract a lot of the powers you use.”

Jason took on the grin of a cat who had just spotted a mouse with a pronounced limp.

“So did the first silver-ranker I killed,” he said. “He died screaming his lost faith to the sky. The archbishop wasn’t much of a martyr in the end.”

“You’re not talking about any of our local religions, are you?”

“No. Now you’ve got some nuggets out of me, it’s time to tell me about my grandmother.”

Gladys nodded.

“Have you ever tried healing Alzheimer’s before?” she asked.

“No,” Jason said. “Chronic problems usually get dealt with before they get to that stage in the other world. There’s a god of healing who seems like a good guy.”

“You say that like you met him.”

“Briefly. Friend of a friend.”

“I can’t tell if you’re making things up or not. Your aura is like nothing I’ve ever seen. Anna will want you to commit to helping our people learn to do that with their auras.”

“We need to settle things regarding my grandmother before I’m going to talk about any kind of arrangement with your organisation.”

Gladys nodded.

“After examining her,” she said, “As best I can tell, you sucked out all the sickness and then fed her a potion.”

“Yes,” Jason said. “Was that not the right approach?”

“It’s not the worst approach you could have taken,” Gladys said. “The basic idea is sound. Excise the disease and then repair the damage. Alzheimer’s is tricky, though. Especially with advanced cases like your grandmother.”

“I was worried about that,” Jason admitted, his expression softening. “Healing magic restores the body using the soul as a blueprint, but I was concerned about what years of dementia had done to affect her soul.”

“That’s precisely the issue,” Gladys said. “You seem to know a bit about magical healing.”

“Just some foundational magic theory,” Jason said. “Do you have some kind of treatment?”

“We do,” Gladys said. “As it is, she’s more or less fully lucid. The memory gaps aren’t going to come back. What we can do is a regime of regular therapy and some more nuanced magical treatment. Over the next few months we can work on consolidating body and soul into a healthy balance and prevent complications from arising in the future.”

“So, my grandmother needs to be in the Network’s care.”

“I’m not just saying this for leverage, Mr Asano. I have better ethics than that. Since you seem to have some grasp on the theory, I can take you through it in more detail, if you like.”

“Yes,” Jason said. “That’s exactly what I’d like.”

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After Jason appeared, only to leave again immediately, there was a commotion as his siblings tried to explain his revival to his mother. This was made harder by not really understanding it themselves.

“Well, if you’d actually shown up to the family meeting – which I made very clear was important,” Erika told her, “then you could have asked him these questions yourself, Mother.”

The doctor re-emerged, giving the family some vague explanations that Ian immediately picked out as sketchy. As a doctor himself he knew when another medical professional was talking nonsense, plus every doctor involved with his wife’s grandmother



was someone he didn't know. He had only been working in the area for a year, but as a regional physician he had made a point of making connections in the local hospital.

Erika had insisted that they wait for Jason before Ian started throwing his weight around, and shortly after Jason arrived, the doctors told them they could see Nanna Glenda.

"No more than two or three at a time," the doctor insisted. "She's lucid, but has a lot of confusion and memory loss. You need to be gentle."

"Mum and Uncle Robbo," Kaito said. "You're her children, so you go first. Erika and I will go after."

Right after Cheryl and Robert were led away, Jason was suddenly back without any of the family having noticed him arrive.

"Jason, what is going on?" Erika asked.

"I'm leaving," he said.

"Are you kidding me?" she asked.

"Jason, what's going on?" Ian asked. "I have no idea who these doctors are, I'm certain they're lying and the whole debacle is shady as a long autumn dusk. Why are they suddenly cooperating?"

"Have Uncle Robbo take Nanna to stay with him," Jason said. "I'll pick up Emi and take her back to my place. Once you're done here, bring Hiro, yourselves and Dad to my place. It's at the marina; Hiro can show you. I'll explain everything. Really everything."

"I'm not sure I want Emi to be part of that," Erika said.

"She already is," Jason said. "She knows more than you do."

"Jason, we're her parents," Erika said fiercely. "That should have been our decision to make."

"I know," Jason acknowledged contritely. "I acted on impulse, sorry."

Kaito looked on, excluded, but didn't speak up.

"I'm going," Jason said to Erika. "I'll see you soon. Can you call Amy and tell her I'm coming?"

"How did you know Amy has her?" Erika asked.

"Didn't I tell you? I've got magic powers."

\*\*\*

Jason walked from his car parked out front to Kaito and Amy's front door. It was a house he had visited almost every day of his childhood, and approaching under current circumstances felt very strange. The strange swirl of emotions was mirrored in Amy's aura,

inside. She had apparently seen him arrive, so he waited by the door instead of knocking and she opened it.

“What did you do to me last night?” she asked. “I wasn’t just imagining it, right?”

“No.”

“So what was it?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. Well, not without some convincing, but that will have to wait.”

“That’s what you’re giving me? You really weirded me out, Jason.”

“Well you threw my heart into a wood chipper, carved my family in half and sent me spiralling into a years long depression during which I basically scuttled my whole life.”

Her gaze drifted over to Jason’s car.

“Your life seems to be going alright.”

“That didn’t come cheap, Amy.”

“So, you’re rich now?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean, Jason?”

Jason untucked his shirt and lifted it up to reveal a torso covered in small scars, plus one thick, savage one extending diagonally across his abdomen.

“Jason, what the hell happened to you?” she asked as he dropped his shirt back down.

“You know the saying about not knowing who you are until you’ve walked through the fire?”

“Yeah.”

“I found out who I am.”

“And who is that?” she asked.

“Someone who doesn’t get to live a quiet life. I wanted this to be you and me, Amy. Why wasn’t I good enough?”

His morose expression transformed into a sparkly-eyed smile and moments later Emi came pounding down the stairs.

“Uncle Jason!”

He caught his niece in a hug.

“Ready to go see my house boat?” he asked.

“Is it all mouldy and gross?” Emi asked.

“No, it is not,” he said indignantly.

“Boo,” Emi jeered.

“At least wait until you see it,” Jason complained. “Say goodbye to your Aunt Amy.”

“Bye, Aunt Amy.” She said as they set off for his car. “Uncle Jason, tuck in your shirt. You look unemployed.”

“I prefer to think of myself as independently wealthy.”

They started walking across the front yard to Jason’s car and Amy called out after them.

“Jason.”

“Yeah?” he asked, pausing and turning around.

“I know I did everything wrong,” she said. “How badly I hurt you. You didn’t deserve that just because I didn’t know how to end things. I really am sorry.”

“I know,” he said.

Her memory of his impish grin went back longer than most things she could remember. When he flashed it for her briefly, it wasn’t the same. He looked at her with the cold eyes of a stranger.

“It just doesn’t matter anymore,” he told her.

“Come, Uncle Jason,” Emi said, tugging on his hand.

“I do not look unemployed,” he merrily complained to his niece, letting himself be dragged towards the car. “I look like a dashing man about town...”

## Chapter 298

### Looking Down the Point of a Sword

“So, how are you doing after yesterday?” Jason asked his niece as Shade drove them toward the marina.

“It’s weird,” Emi said. “I kind of like having this big secret.”

“Well, it’s time to let your Mum and Dad in on the secret,” Jason said. “Do you think you can help stop your Mum from throwing me in the ocean?”

“No promises,” Emi said with a laugh.

“I need to introduce you to some of my friends,” Jason said. “They’re a bit strange, but I think you’ll get along.”

“Strange how?” Emi asked.

“Strange like magic. First is my friend Shade. He’s made of shadows.”

“Made of shadows?”

“Yes. He can also turn into a car.”

Emi started looking around the car interior.

“Yep,” Jason said. “We’re inside him right now. You can say hello, if you like.”

“You want me to talk to your car?”

“Yeah.”

“Like in that terrible TV show Pop keeps trying to make me watch?”

“It’s not terrible,” Jason said. “You know your pop had me watch it when I was a kid and I loved it.”

“It’s a DVD box set, Uncle Jason. It might as well be chiselled on stone tablets.”

“If you will be more comfortable, Miss Emi,” Shade said, “I am happy to initiate the conversation.”

The car talking caused Emi to jolt in her seat.

“You don’t need to be worried about Shade,” Jason said. “He’s very nice. He’s been a good friend, even if he does occasionally keep things from me.”

“If I told you about the World-Phoenix token,” Shade said, “You would have gone and gotten yourself killed even earlier.”

“What do you mean killed?” Emi asked.

“See?” Jason said. “Now look what you’ve done.”

“I thought the idea was to tell them everything,” Shade said.

“Yeah, but the order’s kind of important, Shade.”

“Uncle Jason, what does your car mean by getting killed?” Emi insisted. Jason could sense from her aura that the slight strain of worry in her voice was only a shadow of her true fear. After getting her Uncle Jason back, the thought of losing him again shook her to the core.

“It’s fine,” Jason said, patting his chest with both hands. “Look at me. Here I am, nice and alive.”

“That’s not an answer,” she said. “You’re trying to distract me.”

“And you’re too clever for my own good,” Jason said. “Let me tell you about my other friends. Taika is really nice; he’s fairly normal.”

“Taika like the director?”

“This one doesn’t make movies, although he is from New Zealand. Then there’s Gordon.”

“Is he from New Zealand too?” Emi asked.

“I’m not sure where Gordon’s from,” Jason said.

“The realm of the All-Devouring Eye,” Shade said. “Colin also originates from there.”

“The realm of the All-Devouring Eye?” Emi asked.

“I’m pretty sure it’s in the South Pacific,” Jason said.

“Uncle Jason, why do you tell such obvious lies?”

“So it’s harder to notice the subtle ones,” Jason said. “Tell the truth as much as you can, and if you have to lie, make it obvious. That makes it easier to slip the important lies past people.”

“Miss Emi, I’m not entirely certain that your Uncle Jason is a good role model,” Shade said.

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Annabeth accepted the video call and Gladys’ face appeared on her laptop.

“Well?” Annabeth asked without preamble.

“I didn’t find him at all like you described,” Gladys said.

“Oh?”

“You said amiable, right?”

“He was oddly charming,” Annabeth said. “Emphasis on the odd.”

“I didn’t find that at all,” Gladys said. “With a category three in front of him and his family in the next room, he was hard and sharp. It was like looking down the point of a sword. I swear he was ready to fight right there. Have you seen his aura, Anna?”

“No. He’s a category above me.”

"I've never felt anything like it," Gladys said. "It feels like a weapon and I swear it was almost as strong as mine. Add in that insane control and I don't think I'd win, aura to aura."

"We knew he was dangerous."

"This is more than dangerous, Anna. I don't think he's stable. Right now, he's looking down the barrel of a world full of forces he doesn't understand and he doesn't know how to protect his family. He's flailing in ignorance and he knows it, so he's going overboard because it's all he has. He's fully aware that it's a flimsy shield, so he's doing everything he can to prop it up. I don't think he'd be an entirely reliable ally."

"You think we shouldn't try to pull him in?"

"Oh, we definitely want him on our side," Gladys said. "His aura control techniques alone leave us in the dust. Also, not for nothing: that is not a man I want to make an enemy of. What he needs more than anything else is someone he can trust, and if we can provide that, I think the dividends will be amazing."

"Agreed," Annabeth said. "That will be a big ask after what the Lyon branch did, though."

"No kidding," Gladys said. "Right now, he's a gun ready to go off. It's kind of sexy."

"Gladys..."

"I know, I know. I'm not a cradle robber, Anna. Give it a decade, though, and that boy might be in some trouble. Have you considered trying to honey trap him? I bet you won't have trouble finding people willing to throw themselves in front of that bus."

"I've had people running background," Anna said. "It seems that he had a family rift stemming from his long-term girlfriend, who is now his sister-in-law."

"Ouch."

"Yes," Annabeth agreed. "Our analysts suggest that he likely has a deep sensitivity to betrayal in general and romantic betrayal especially. Even if we play it fairly straight and just make sure an agent is available and open to forming a relationship, he's likely to be sensitive to that kind of manipulation. If something went wrong, that could be very bad."

"How bad?"

"Marching through our headquarters with a chainsaw bad," Annabeth said

"Probably best be careful, then," Gladys acceded. "Especially while he's on a hair trigger."

"Our analysts think that an open alliance with well-defined terms is what he'll respond best to."

"Well, he has a lot to bring to the table," Gladys said. "I was able to probe his magical knowledge a little."

“He was only gone a year and a half,” Annabeth said. “How much can he have picked up?”

“You’d be surprised,” Gladys said. “I was. He claims to only have a basic grounding in different kinds of magic, but I think that’s more than enticing enough.”

“That makes sense,” Anna mused. “Our definition of the basics is different to someone from a magical alternate reality.”

“Fortunately, we bring things to the table as well,” Gladys said. “He seems to genuinely appreciate our treatment of his grandmother. Fortunately, he was smart enough to feed her a healing potion as soon as he removed the disease. Getting that healing in immediately gave us a good head start on the treatment. Now she just needs some regular, specialised therapy.”

“I suggest you start charging him for it, preferably in magic materials,” Annabeth said.

“That won’t alienate him?” Gladys asked.

“It keeps the arrangement honest and keeps it out in the open,” Annabeth said.

“That’s exactly what we want.”

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They arrived at the marina and Emi goggled at Jason’s opulent boathouse.

“How much money do you have?” she asked.

“I’ve got a huge pile of gold, so a lot.”

“You have a huge pile of gold?”

“Yeah. Actually, let me show you a trick.”

He took a bar of gold out of his inventory. To Emi, it looked like he plucked it out of thin air.

“I know that could be just slight of hand,” he said.

“That’s too light,” Emi said.

“The gold bar?” Jason said.

“Yeah. It should be heavy.”

“Jason held out the ten kilogram metal bar. Emi took it in her hands, but it immediately slipped through. Jason reached out with a shadow arm and caught it, then put it back into his inventory.

“See?” he said.

“Your arm got longer,” Emi said. “And it turned black.”

“Yep,” Jason said. “Magic powers, remember.”

“How did you get them?”

“I’ll explain all that when your parents get here.”

“Can I get them?”

“Not until you’re older,” Jason said. “At least a few years.”

“Really? How many years?”

“It depends on when your body is able to accept them. For most people that’s around sixteen or seventeen, but that’s just the centre of the curve. My friend Rufus had to wait until he was nineteen.”

“Do lots of people have them in Africa?”

“Lots of people have them in the place I’ve been all this time,” Jason said.

“That’s not the same thing as saying yes,” Emi said, causing Jason to chuckle.

“You’re trouble, you know that?” he asked.

“Is trouble good?” he asked.

“Trouble is very good,” he said, ruffling her hair. “You’ll understand everything soon. As to whether you believe it, that’s another thing. For now, let’s go take a tour of the houseboat, yeah?”

“Is it a magic houseboat?”

“Can you keep a secret?” Jason asked. “Look who I’m talking to; of course you can. Don’t tell anyone, but this houseboat may be the single most magical item on Earth.”

“Are there a lot of magical items on Earth?”

“A lot more than I thought, as it turns out” Jason said.

“You realise that if magic exists,” she said, “it changes everything we know about the universe.”

“It doesn’t so much change it as expand it,” Jason said. “It’s just that the things we don’t understand turns out to be a larger pool than we realised. There are ways to explore beyond the boundaries of our universe. And it’s not like the scientific method is invalidated all of a sudden. In fact, I have a friend who is basically a research scientist, but his area is magic. Well, aspects of magic. As with science, there are many fields of study.”

Jason took her around the houseboat, which Emi found suitably impressive. One of Shade’s bodies accompanied them, giving Emi a look at his normal figure. In the kitchen they met Taika, who they caught raiding the houseboat’s supply of coconut rum balls.

“There are a weird number of homemade snacks on this houseboat,” Taika said.

“You should see our house,” Emi told him. “Those snacks tend to be healthier than what I’m seeing here, though.”

“I need extra carbs and protein,” Jason said defensively. “I have a condition.”

“What condition?” Emi asked.

“Super powers,” Jason said.



“He does,” Taika said. “A bunch of bikers attacked our car and he went all magic and stuff. I didn’t get to see much at the time because I was concentrating on driving but it was all over the news.”

“That really was you on the news?” Emi said.

“Oh, yeah,” Taika said. “He got shot a whole bunch of times.”

Jason felt a streak of panic shoot through Emi’s aura and gave Taika a withering glare.

“Taika,” he said through gritted teeth. “Maybe we don’t tell my twelve year old niece about the horrifying situation we were in?”

“You’re impervious to bullets, bro. That was a horrible situation for me, but you seemed to be having fun.”

“Taika, maybe it’s time for that errand?”

“Oh, yeah. No worries, bro. You got the cash?”

Jason took an envelope stuffed with hundreds from his inventory and handed it over.

“Damn, bro. How much to you want me to get?”

“There’s a list in the envelope,” Jason said.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “Your family members have left the hospital and will be here in around twenty minutes.”

“Thank you, Shade.”

“How do you know that?” Emi asked.

“I have multiple bodies,” Shade said. “Your Uncle has had me watching out for your mother, your grandfather and yourself since his arrival in this township.”

“You’ve been watching me?” Emi asked.

“Yes,” Shade said. “I have been hidden in the shadows around you, even your own.”

“Have you been watching me pee?”

“Mr Asano asked me to remain at a remove during your more delicate moments,” Shade said. “I feel that this compromises my ability to secure your person to the fullest extent of my capacity, but I have complied.”

“Shade,” Jason said. “I’m not going to let you watch her pee.”

“Miss Asano, I’m older than your species. I can assure you that I take no interest in your biological necessities. If you could convince your Uncle...”

“No,” Jason said definitively.

“Wait, if you’re with me all the time,” Emi asked, “Can you turn into a car and drive me places?” Emi asked.

“A car takes multiple bodies, while only one stays with you,” Shade said. “I could turn into a motorcycle.”

Emi’s head turned to Jason on a swivel, adorable eyes glistening with hope.

“Absolutely not,” he said.

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Ian was driving back to Casselton Beach from the hospital on the outskirts of Castle Heads. Hiro was in the passenger seat while Erika and her father were in the back.

“I’m not sure we should have rushed off like this, Erika,” Ken said.

“Dad,” Erika said. “I want answers. Uncle Robbo is taking Nanna back to his place, so there’s no point hanging around the hospital. Ian, you’re driving too slow.”

“I don’t know if you’ve ever noticed those signs with the numbers on them next to the road, dear,” Ian said, “but they have to do with how fast cars are allowed to go.”

Erika groaned her complaint while Ken and Hiro chuckled.

“You’re a braver man than most, Ian,” Ken said.

“This family needs more women,” Erika muttered.

“If you’re looking to have another kid,” Ian said, “I still have my sexy pirate outfit. It kind of went to waste the other night.”

“Quite enough of that kind of talk, thank you,” Ken said. “Her father is right here, Ian.”

“Sorry, Ken.”

“Of course, if you *are* looking at giving me another grandchild, I could be convinced to cover my ears.”

“Dad, ick.”

“I’m not saying right here in the car, Sweetie,” Ken told Erika. “Although, you could drop Hiro and myself off while you two go...”

“Dad!”

“You know, you were conceived in a ’76 HJ Holden...”

“DAD!”

Ian and Hiro were laughing in the front, as Erika glared at her father.

They arrived at the Casselton Beach marina, Hiro directing Ian where to park.

“Should I just look for that crazy car of Jason’s?” Ian asked.

“It might not be here,” Hiro said. “You’ll be able to see it easily.”

“Holy crap,” Ken said as the houseboat came into view. “Is that it?”

“That’s the one,” Hiro said, pointing. “The jetty access is just there.”

“That’s Jason’s houseboat?” Ken asked.

“How is that anyone’s houseboat?” Ian said. “That’s bigger than our actual house. By a lot. Should we buy a bigger house?”

They piled out of the car as another car arrived and parked just one spot along. It was Taika, driving Hiro’s new car.

“Oh, hey boss,” Taika greeted and Hiro made introductions.

“What are you up to?” Hiro asked.

“Jason asked me to stock up the bar. He said he didn’t have any regular booze, just the magic stuff.”

“Magic stuff?” Ian asked.

“Right, you’re here to learn about all that,” Taika said. “I think alcohol was a good idea.”

The others offered to help Taika, each taking a crate of drinks from the car while Taika carried one under each arm.

“How much did you actually buy?” Hiro asked, seeing that they were leaving at least as many behind. As well as filling the boot, the crates were loaded up in the back and passenger seats.

“This is just the plonk,” Taika said. “It’ll probably be two runs for mixers and stuff.”

## Chapter 299

### What Your Uncle Has Been Telling You

Erika approached the houseboat flanked by her family and the towering figure of Taika, all carrying crates of alcohol. Jason and Emi came out to meet them, standing on the lower deck that was level with the jetty. Jason waved them aboard.

"Thanks for helping with the drinks," he said. "We may as well do this whole thing in the bar lounge. We'll probably need those drinks by the time we're done."

"There's a bar lounge?" Ian asked.

"Look at this place," Ken said. "I'm guessing they started with a bar lounge and built a houseboat around it."

"Jason, are you finally going to stop dodging me?" Erika asked.

"Yes," he said. They spotted immediately that he was more subdued than his usual self, gently holding his niece's hand.

"How's Mum?" he asked.

"Freaked out," Erika said. "Her son just came back to life and her mother's Alzheimer's is miraculously cured. All she got in explanation were second-hand accounts of the vague nonsense you told us. Why did you do it like that?"

"If she doesn't want to show up for family meetings, then that's what she gets," Jason said, his father nodding in approval.

"Jason," Erika said. "This isn't like sorting out Great Aunt Marjory subscribing us all to Christian Quarterly. You came back from the dead."

"Yes," Jason said. "Twice, thus far."

"What do you mean, twice?"

"First things first," Jason said. "Before we can start, I need to change your understanding of what is and isn't possible."

"Are you completely certain you didn't join a cult?" Ian asked.

"You have to see for yourself, Dad," Emi said, standing next to Jason.

"Come on," Jason said. He traded Erika's crate of alcohol for her daughter and led them across the lower deck and through the tinted glass doors that slid open at their approach. Inside was a sprawling lounge, with soft chairs of white leather and glass walls running around three sides. They put the crates down by the bar and looked around at the opulence.

"There's a bloody mezzanine," Ian said, causing the rest to turn their gazes to the upper level. "God damn, Jason."

“Hiro, Taika and Emi have already seen what I’m about to show you,” Jason said. “Today we’re going further than what I’ve revealed so far. It’s going to take a while, so expect to be here for the day.”

“What about all the stuff you told us before?” Erika asked. “Being a mercenary in Africa.”

“Everything I told you is true,” Jason said, “but also incomplete. There’s something very important that I left out, and much more to tell. I’m going to begin by showing you something. Then something else and something after that. One impossible thing after another until your perspective of impossibility itself undergoes a fundamental change.”

“Bro, you sound like one of those guys with a TV show that explains magic tricks. You’re pretty big into melodrama, hey.”

“Taika, I’m trying to set a mood here,” Jason complained as his family chuckled.

“Sorry, bro.”

“Stop dancing around it, Jason,” Erika said. “What is it you’re going to show us?”

“Alright,” Jason said. He opened up a portal arch, which rose up from the floor. The black obsidian arch, filled with darkness, was incongruous with the lavishly appointed lounge.

“I’ll be waiting on the other side,” Jason said and stepped through.

The others went through the same startled examination of the arch that Taika and Hiro did on their first exposure to it. They walked around, examining the arch Jason had vanished into from both sides, peering into the darkness. Erika checked the floor for a mechanism it had used to rise up while Ian ran his fingers over the arch.

“This is solid stone,” Ian said. “is he a magician now?”

“Not a magician, Dad,” Emi said. “A wizard.”

“A wizard,” Erika said disapprovingly. “I don’t know what your uncle has been telling you, Emi, but he is not a wizard.”

“Come find me then,” she said and dashed through the portal herself.

“Emi!” Ian called out, then immediately followed her through the arch.

“What is happening?” Ken asked as his family vanished one by one.

“It’s a lot, I know,” Hiro told his brother. “I also know from experience that once you step through that door, everything changes. I don’t think there is a way to prepare for what comes next.”

Ken nodded at his brother, squared his shoulders and marched resolutely into the portal. That left Erika with Hiro and Taika.

“Don’t look at me,” Taika said. “I’m going to get the rest of those drinks.”

Hiro gave Erika a sympathetic smile, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“You’re looking for answers in a world that’s making less sense with every passing day,” he said. “I’ve been there. Very, very recently. We both still have a lot to learn.”

He held out his hand for her to take and led her toward the arch.

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The point at Castle Bluff had a paved and railed lookout area that ran along the cliff face. Further back was a park where much of Jason’s family was throwing up on the grass. The winter wind was blowing in off the ocean, making the park trees hiss like snakes as the wind savaged its way through the leaves.

Jason stood at the railing looking out. Emi was beside him, holding his hand as the wind whipped her hair around her head. There was no one else out on the bluff on the blustery day.

Despite being the last of the family to arrive, Erika recovered the quickest, looking around disbelievingly at their surroundings. The portal was still there, taunting her with its impossibility. As she stared at it, Taika emerged, putting a hand to his stomach until it settled. He glanced around, nodding with approval, then made his way toward Jason.

“Did you want me to go get the mixers and stuff, bro?” Taika half-yelled over the wind.

“Leave it for now,” Jason said. Despite not speaking loudly, his voice oddly cut right through the wind.

“When we get back, stick around, yeah?” Jason said to Taika.

“I thought maybe it was a family thing?” Taika said.

“I got you caught up in all this,” Jason said. “I’ll see you through all the way, brother.”

“Thanks, bro. Alright, I’m going to go do a mixer run while you’re showing them stuff here, yeah?”

“You’ll have time,” Jason said. “They’re a stubborn bunch. I mean, look at them. They just got teleported and they’re staring at the sky like it owes them money.”

Taika glanced over at Jason’s family, who were starting to recover and, as he said, looking at their surroundings in suspicious disbelief.

Erika, having recovered, also made her way to Jason, held out a hand towards her daughter. Emi ignored the hand, moving past it to embrace her mother in a huge hug.

“Emi,” Erika said, staring at Jason over her daughter’s head. He had turned from the railing and leaned back against it, watching her with sparkling eyes. There was an ease to the way he leaned against the rail, a confidence like nothing she’d seen from him before.

Confidence wasn’t an area in which Jason had ever been lacking, but this man before her was different from the cocky boy who thought he was smarter than everyone. This was

deeper, less forced and more assured, as if he feared nothing the world could throw at him. She felt it strange that she suddenly had that certainty about him, to the degree of it being suspicious.

“What you’re feeling is my aura,” Jason said. “Not that nonsense they take photos of in new age shops, but the real thing.”

“Jason, that’s ridiculous.”

“I won’t deny it, but look at where we are Eri. How did we get here?”

“I can’t explain that,” she said, “but it definitely wasn’t through the power of reflexology and crystal healing.”

“Try the archway again,” Jason said. “You’ll get used to the queasiness and disorientation, I’m told. Not entirely, but it gets easier.”

“You’re told?” Erika asked.

“I don’t suffer from it,” Jason said. “A quirk of constitution. Seriously, give it another few goes.”

“I will!” Emi said rushing off to the portal. She started dashing rapidly in and out until she staggered away with a goofy grin, dizzy from the disorientation. Jason and Erika looked on, standing side by side.

“You know I’m the coolest uncle ever, right?” Jason asked Erika as he slipped an arm around his sister’s shoulders. “Eri, magic is real. I know that’s crazy but crazy is where I’ve been living for a while, now.”

“It’s beyond crazy,” she said.

“Oh, this is only the beginning,” he said.

Emi fell over in the grass, dizzy, while her father went to make sure she didn’t roll over into someone’s vomit. The rest of the family had recovered and were approaching Jason, still looking around in disbelief.

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“Vermillion,” Annabeth greeted over the phone. “I was sorry to hear you were demoted.”

“It’s not without its benefits,” Vermillion said. “You should see the house they’ve put me up in.”

“I’d like that,” Annabeth said. “Would you be willing to play host for when we talk with him?”

“He insists on hosting you himself, on his houseboat,” Vermillion said.

“He’s not willing to accept neutral ground? That doesn’t speak well to his willingness to come to an accommodation.”

“His position,” Vermillion said, “is that he has one houseboat and you have the rest of the planet, being an international network of secret magicians. Who have already tried to kidnap him once, you might recall. I think you should just concede the point, Anna.”

“I’ll talk to my boss and get back to you. Did he agree to a day?”

“Tuesday,” Vermillion said. “From what I can see, he’s eager to get this done.”

“The day after tomorrow,” Annabeth said. “We can work with that.”

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Jason needed the family to get it in their heads that magic was genuinely a thing. They were a sceptical bunch, with Erika especially reaching for mundane explanations much as her daughter had. Back at the marina, in preparation for some dramatic show and tell, he had Shade scout the area around the houseboat for potential eavesdroppers. Even on a late Sunday morning, the marina was winter quiet.

In the parking lot, Jason began by demonstrating his inventory. He took things in and out, including Hiro’s car. He showed them Shade turning into a car and returned the houseboat to the cloud flask and bringing it out again, now with magical cloud interior.

Back on the houseboat he moved around the interior, transforming rooms as they watched. He ran a power drill through his hand, which had trouble fighting through his damage reduction, then chugged a bottle of household bleach, which his powers turned into healing that restored the injury on his hand.

They returned to the bar lounge, now made up of cloud stuff in gorgeous sunset colours. After everything they had seen, Jason gave them time to let it all sink in.

Taika was freshly back from his second run of mixers and was putting away all the fruit, sugar syrup, soda water and other drink ingredients. Ken was looking shell-shocked, Hiro sitting with him and talking quietly. Ian was sitting with his daughter while Erika and Jason made cocktails at the bar, side by side as she continued to grill him.

“I swear, Jason,” Erika told him. “You better not have met some ridiculous illusionist and conceived all this as a mad, elaborate prank. I will go to the hardware store and buy one of those big PVC barrels, knock you out, throw you into the barrel, fill it with concrete, borrow Wally’s boat, take the barrel out into the ocean and drop you to the bottom of the Pacific. You’ve disappeared once; it won’t seem that strange.”

“That’s suspiciously well thought-through,” Jason said. “Ian, has your wife been killing people and dumping them in the ocean?”

“Absolutely not,” Ian said. “They changed all the judges on Kitchen Conquest because the network refused to bump their pay and definitely not for any other reason. I didn’t tell him anything, honey.”



“Is this really the time for jokes, husband? Jason, pass the sliced limes.”

“Sweetie,” Ian said, “Jason came back from the dead and is apparently an indestructible wizard now. Once your brother turns into Gandalf the White, I think we’re in uncharted territory, decorum-wise.”

“It wouldn’t kill me anyway,” Jason said. “Hand me the rum. No the white rum. Never mind.”

His arm extended to grab the bottle from the end of the bar.

“Apparently he’s also Mr Fantastic,” Ian said.

“How could being dropped into the ocean inside a solid block of concrete not kill you?” Erika asked.

“Well, the pressure might get me, if you dumped me in the Marianas Trench. Is Wally’s boat big enough to get out there? Anyway, my mate Gordon would get me out before I got too deep. He’d make pretty short work of concrete. And I don’t breathe anymore, so that’s not an issue.”

“You don’t breathe?” Erika asked.

“Who’s Gordon?” Ian asked at the same time.

“Okay,” Jason said. “I think we’ve reached the portion of the proceedings where we need to sit down and have it explained from the start, if only to organise what is a lot of crazy. Let’s all go to the media room, since I’m going to start things off with a video presentation.”

“Seriously?” Erika asked. “Like one of those employee induction videos, but for magic?”

“It’s more of a magical hologram than an actual video,” Jason said.

The group settled into the couches and recliners of the media room and Jason took out a carousel of recording crystals, plucking a crystal from the very first row. A projector emerged from the floor and he slotted it in before taking a seat between his sister and niece on one of the couches.

An image appeared in front of them, an opulent living space in cool ocean greens and blues. Jason was in front of it, but Jason as they remembered: clean-shaven, prominent chin.

“Hello,” image Jason said, waving out from the image. “I’m not sure if, or when you’ll be seeing this, but I didn’t die, or whatever you think happened to me. You probably know that, since the only way you’re likely to see this is if I give it to you.”

He let out a dissatisfied groan. His voice was also the way they remembered, less deep and resonant. The group all looked at Jason’s current self for comparison.

“Maybe I should have scripted this,” image Jason continued. “Oh, well. Where should I start? It’s been about two months since I arrived here. Where is here? That’s complicated. I’ve made some friends. I just got a new job, although I haven’t started yet. They’re meant to be sending my ID over today. The application process involved sort of a week-long retreat, which I got back from a couple of days ago.”

Image Jason took a deep, centring breath.

“I still needed to breathe, at that stage,” real Jason pointed out.

“I suppose I should start with that complicated question of where I am,” image Jason said. “Right now, as you can see, I’m in an expensive hotel suite. It isn’t actually mine; that’s across the hall. This one belongs to some of those friends I mentioned. They went three-bedroom, which came with this nice, open living area.”

The image panned off Jason, turning toward a pair of open French doors leading onto a balcony. The recording moved forward, giving them a view of a cerulean sea.

“Nice, right?” Jason’s voice came from the recording. “One of my new friends is kind of a big deal, so he got the best room in the house. We’re on an artificial island, which is pretty crazy, given the size. At some point I’ll do a tour video. The subways here are amazing.”

“Jason,” a woman’s melodic voice came from the recording. “Who are you talking to?” Erika and Emi both felt Jason flinch when they heard her speak.

## Chapter 300

### The Moments That Decide Who You Are

It was a strange closing of the circle as Jason watched his recordings with his family. Seeing himself with no way of ever knowing if the moment he was now experiencing would ever happen.

There was over a hundred and fifty hours of the recordings. Most of the early recording were of Jason exploring areas of Greenstone as he gave an in-depth narration of his experiences to date. His family did one of the few things even less plausible than magic by taking a genuine interest in a family member's holiday videos.

They watched until the early evening, at which point Jason put a stop to it, not replacing the latest crystal after it was done. There were protests, but Erika and Jason shared a look, his eyes flicking in Emi's direction. Erika picked his signal that not all the records were tween appropriate and helped quell the other's insistence on continuing.

"There is plenty more where that came from and it's all here waiting for you," Jason said. "In the meantime, there is more you need to know. Specifically, about the state of the world here and now. You've all just become part of a wider reality, and you need to understand the new world you're living in."

Jason proceeded to explain the three hegemonic powers, how he had healed Nanna and the treatment she would need to give her the most effective recovery.

"Why are you telling us all this?" Ian asked. "You said yourself that at least some of these groups have a vested interest in secrecy."

"Because the secret is going to come out," Jason said. "Probably sooner than later. After the circumstances of my disappearance, Erika ran into that secret herself, before being crudely warned off. When the world finds out, it will be an incredibly unstable time. I want the family ready when that time comes."

"What about Kaito and Mum?" Erika asked.

"I'll bring them in," Jason said. "I'll tell them everything, the same as with you. But the people in this room will be responsible for keeping the family safe. Over the next few weeks and months, each of you will obtain magic for yourselves. We'll select those powers together, from what I can get access to, and I'll train you to use them. Emi too, but only once she's old enough."

"You aren't going to give Mum and Kaito powers?" Erika asked.

"I don't know about Kaito and Amy," Jason said. "They have two young children, which leaves them essentially zero time to train. If I have enough resources to be going on

with, then maybe. Mum, definitely not. I don't have the time or patience for her trying to take charge of everything."

"Can you show us an essence?" Emi asked. "We saw them in the recordings, but I want to see one in person."

Jason took a plant essence from his inventory and handed it to her. The cube was a dark, earthy brown riddled with green like roots in soil.

"This is a plant essence," he explained as the group gathered around the object Emi was holding in her hands. Jason pulled out some others and passed them around, along with some awakening stones.

Finally, Jason sent everyone off, except for Hiro and Taika.

"I've thrown a lot of crazy stuff at you today," he told them. "It's going to take a while to sink in. Take the night; you'll think of a lot of things you want to know. I suggest you write them down and you can bring them to me whenever you like. Except Tuesday, when I'll be negotiating with a secret organisation working with the government to keep magic a secret from the world. I never got to do that at the office supply store, but I was only an assistant manager. That's probably store manager level stuff."

Erika and Ian informed Emi that no, she was not allowed to stay on the houseboat with Uncle Jason as she had school in the morning. They took Ken with them to drop off on the way home. One of the advantages of a small town was nothing really being out of the way.

Jason, Hiro and Taika kicked back in the lounge.

"So you really healed all those kids in the hospital?"

"Yeah. I didn't know the local players, so I needed to flush them out. If I can heal a bunch of kids while I'm at it, then all the better."

"Are you going to do it again?" Taika asked. "There's a lot more sick kids out there."

"I won't do it like that," Jason said. "The media and political storm I kicked up was so big it impacted hospital operations. I'm told the Network has ways to do the same thing without kicking up a stink."

"And if that doesn't pan out?" Hiro asked.

"Then we'll see," Jason said. "Taika, now that you know more and you've heard what's coming, you should give some thought to your own family."

"What happens if all this magic stuff comes out into the open?" Taika asked. "Are they in danger?"

"I honestly don't know," Jason said. "It could be anything from a blip on the radar to the end of civilisation. It might be just one more thing the rich people keep to themselves

and a month later we're back to obsessing over celebrity scandals. Or it could be a new world war as everyone grasps for new power. I hate to think about what happens when religion gets involved. If we're really lucky, it could be a dawn of peace and prosperity as magic helps us overcome disease, poverty and climate change."

"Where would you put the odds of that?" Hiro asked.

"It seems pretty unrealistic," Jason said. "And that's coming from an interdimensional warlock ninja who came back from the dead. Twice."

"Did you really come back from the dead?" Hiro asked.

"Oh yeah," Jason said, tugging at the collar of his shirt. It revealed a scar at the base of his throat. "I got impaled through the throat. Amongst other places."

"How did you come back?"

"That's a secret I don't have all the answers to," Jason said. "I'm not going to answer that."

"Can you do it again?" Hiro asked, but Jason responded only with a saturnine smile.

"Alright," Hiro said. "Something I've been thinking about, then. You know I've been talking about a legitimate development project once the EOA handover is completed."

"Sure," Jason said.

"What if it was a residential community? Like the gated communities in America, except built to keep out dangerous magic rather than ethnic minorities. Is there some way we could plan to bake in magical protection, right from the planning stage? Secretly build a place where our friends and family can be safe if things do go bad?"

"That's an interesting idea," Jason said, thoughtfully rubbing his chin. "A very interesting idea. I'd need to advance my understanding of array and formation magic, but I just so happen to have an excellent library of appropriate theoretical texts. I'll have to do some reading before I can tell you how viable that is."

"It's not like I need an answer today," Hiro said. "I need to finalise things in Sydney before I even look at what comes next. I'd like to head into Sydney later in the week, if that works for you. I know enough now that I don't want to meet them without you watching my back."

"Of course," Jason said. "Set something up and let me know a time. Anything Wednesday or later works for me."

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Casselton Beach had pleasant winters, but it was shaping up to be an especially fine day. The sky was crystal clear and the weather was projecting a high of 26 degrees. When Shade took his car form, it was open top, Jason patting the door appreciatively.

“Have I ever told you how awesome you are, Shade? Because you’re awesome.”

Jason took the wheel himself as he threw on some music and enjoyed the drive out of town as he headed for his father’s new place. It was just a few minutes out of Casselton Beach, which was still enough to leave the small town behind and hit pleasantly pastoral countryside.

Ken had picked out a good-sized patch of land that occupied an entire hilltop. It had panoramic views on all sides, with a vast open sky overhead, although parking was not ideal. There was a short, gravel drive off the access road on the far side of the property from the cottage where Ken was living. Jason parked next to his father’s flat tray Land Cruiser.

Jason picked his way through an expansive landscaping project that was currently little more than a hilltop covered in dirt, large holes and a scattering of native trees. Jason walked around dug-out dirt beds as he navigated towards the little wooden cottage where his father was living. Even the grass was largely torn out, with only some of the native trees left intact. They dotted the property, all the works careful to avoid their root systems.

Jason knew enough to realise how ambitious the project was. His father was literally reshaping the hilltop in preparation of establishing the foundational infrastructure. It was something that would take years to reach fruition.

The old wooden cottage was the exact opposite of Jason’s lavish magical home. He could just imagine the interior, all worn down wood and faded furniture. The only new things would be the big TV and the extra shelves for all the DVDs. Give his father a bunch of solar panels and the complete series set of Magnum P.I. and Ken would happily wait out the zombie apocalypse.

Jason found his father in a folding camp chair outside the cottage, overlooking the property with a pensive look. He had an old car stereo sitting on a brick and set to a golden oldies station. It was wired up to a loose car battery. Ken had watched Jason pick his way across the property, then got up to hug his son as he arrived.

“You know, Dad, both of those things are meant to be in an actual car.”

“If I wanted a car up here,” Ken said, “then there’d be a car up here.”

Jason chuckled as he moved to stand side by side with his father and look out over the property.

“This is ambitious,” Jason said.

“After what happened with you and then your mother,” Ken said, “I didn’t know how to go forward. I wasn’t feeling that excitement for any of the projects I was being offered. I needed something different; something I could lose myself in. I didn’t have any passion

left. I've been lucky enough that money wasn't a problem, so I packed in the business and went looking for that something. This is what I found."

"You're still getting ready to put the bones into place," Jason said.

"Yep," Ken said. "I'm not sure I know how to do this after what happened yesterday, though. The things you showed us. The world just changed around me, Jason, and once again I have no idea how to go forward from here. How do you go back to living a normal life after learning those things?"

"You don't," Jason said. "You can trust me on that one. Life is different now and there's no going back. Change doesn't have to be bad, though. I'm back, and I come bearing gifts."

He took out an essence and placed it in his father's hands.

"You have no concept of what it's like to wield magic," Jason said. "It isn't that much of a sensation, at first. You can feel it inside you but it's just a seed. As you grow stronger you can feel the power. You make it your own and then, when you use it..."

Jason shook his head, a smile on his face.

"It's like feeling the universe wash through you. I don't know if there's a drug that feels that good, which is probably for the best."

"Jason, I'm fifty-six years old. I don't know that I'm up for whatever it is you have planned."

"That's the best part," Jason said. "You'll be healthy. Strong. Strong enough to maybe help me put aside old grudges. It'll be awkward and uncomfortable. You'll fight with Mum, I'll fight with Kaito. And Mum, probably. But we'll be there for one another. There are strange days ahead, and there will be things that I need to do."

His voice dropped to a whisper.

"There are things I've already done. I'm not sure who I am anymore, Dad."

Ken placed an arm around Jason's shoulders as his son's quiet voice broke.

"Don't worry, son. You can tell the others as much or as little as you'd like. But whatever you tell me, I'll listen, and you will never have to be ashamed."

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After unburdening his sins to his father, Jason was fearful of how Ken would look at him afterward. For a long time, Ken looked at his son in silence, Jason's nerves fraying like old wires.

"I'm not going to tell you that the things you've done were right or wrong," Ken said finally. "You can't change the past, only the future."

“I’m going to have these choices all over in the future,” Jason said. “I’m not naïve enough to think I can avoid that anymore.”

“Jason. In life, there are things that you want to do, and things that you need to do. That’s true whether you’re a dimension-hopping wizard or a landscape architect who only gets more handsome with age. Next time you’re in a position to kill – every time you’re in a position to kill – then you have a choice to make.”

“It’s not always a choice, Dad.”

“Like I said: some things you need to do. That’s not unique to you; it’s something plenty of people face. Soldiers, cops and yes, magicians from another universe. But don’t fool yourself into confusing what you want with what you need. If you get the choice and you realise that you want to kill someone, don’t think about whether to kill them or not. Think about whether you want to be the person that killed them or if you want to be the person who showed mercy. You’re more important than them and what they deserve. Those will be the moments that decide who you are, son, and every choice is a chance to turn a little more in one direction or the other.”

“The two wolves,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Ken said. “You’ve got the good wolf and the bad wolf fighting inside you. You get more chances to feed them than most, and it sounds like maybe you’ve been feeding the wrong one.”

After letting everything out to his father, Jason finally felt a crack in the angry vigilance that he hadn’t been able to shake. He needed to start acting smarter and more diplomatically if he was going to keep his family safe and get them ready for the future. Playing chicken with ancient orders of magic would only hurt them in the long run.

He was back on the road when his phone rang and Shade closed the hard top on the car to cut down on wind noise. It was Erika.

“Jason, I’ve got a production meeting running long and Ian can’t leave the practice. Can you pick up Emi from the academy for us? She stays late for the advanced program, so she can’t take the bus back.”

“I’d love to.”

“Thanks,” Erika said. “Normally I’d ask Mum, because even she’s never too busy for granddaughter time, but she’s with Nanna out at Uncle Robbo’s farm.”

“No worries, Eri. You’ll come and pick her up from my place?”

“Damn right I will,” Erika said. “I’ve been writing down questions all day. Oh, Wally says g’day, by the way. He asked if you’d to do an episode; we’re filming all next week.”



“Give him a firm maybe,” Jason said. “I don’t know what my next few weeks are going to look like.”

“Alright, I’ll call ahead to the school and put you on the list of people allowed to pick Emi up. You’ll need to check in with the office, the first time.”

“No worries. See you this afternoon, Sis.”

Jason took the turn for Castle Heads as Shade retracted the roof once more.

“Back to school,” Jason mused.

Arriving at the academy, Shade, for once, was not wildly out of place. The cars present to pick them up all cost more than a teacher’s annual salary, from dark German sedans to bright Italian sports cars.

“Who needs a Lamborghini here?” Jason asked. “I bet none of these pricks need to outrun bikers hopped up on vampire blood.”

Most of the students had been picked up an hour earlier, with only those in extra-curriculars or the advanced program like Emi still around. That left a handful of cars in the largely empty parking lot, with a cluster of parents gathered outside, chatting as they waited. There were also what appeared to be a number of household staff sent to pick up young scions, who had also formed their own little group.

Jason parked and made his way to administration to register himself.

“I thought Mrs Asano’s other brother died,” the elderly receptionist said.

“Well, we all thought you died in 2006, Mrs Wilkins, yet here we both are.”

“Oh, now I recognise you. The one with the mouth. You know, we all really liked your brother and sister, here.”

“Story of my life, Mrs Wilkins.”

Jason headed back outside to wait for Emi. He felt the gathered parents turn their attention on him through their auras. One of the people wandered over.

“Excuse me,” the man said. “You look a lot like someone I used to know.”

“G’day, Silas,” Jason said.

“Jason, that’s really you? You look good, man. Especially given that I went to your memorial service. What happened to the whole being dead thing?”

“You’ve heard the saying ‘too sexy to die?’ Not just a saying, as it turns out.”

“Well, you did me a solid,” Silas said. “You remember Asya Karadeniz? She’s looking good too and I almost got a leg over with the whole shared grief thing.”

“You and Asya? Does she have self esteem issues, these days?”

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” Silas said wistfully.

“Aren’t you here to pick a up a kid? You should try and sound less date-rapey.”

"It's my little cousin," Silas said. "He's on the soccer team. With your cousin, I think."

"Right," Jason said, remembering that Toby would be sixteen, now.

Jason had two cousins, on his father's side; the children of his Uncle Shiro. Like His sister and himself, the brothers were separated by about a decade. The older, Koji, was Jason's age and they had spent a lot of time together as children, although not by choice. The younger, Tobio, had been ten the last time Jason saw him.

Jason was contemplating how to handle meeting his cousin when Emi arrived in the parking area.

"Uncle Jason!"

"That's me," Jason said. "Good seeing you, Silas."

"See you around, I guess. Congrats on not being dead."

Emi was positively bouncing as he climbed into the car.

"Shade, you're a convertible now? That is so cool!"

"Good afternoon, Miss Emi."

"I came up with so many questions," Emi said.

"So did your mother, apparently."

"So that Farrah lady is really cute. Are you and her a thing?"

"That's what you want to ask? An alternate magical universe and that's your first question."

"That wasn't a no," Emi said.

"No, we weren't a thing. She was a friend and a teacher. She meant a lot to me, but not like that."

"Was?" Emi said, her excitement doused in cold water.

"Yeah," Jason said. "You'll see that when you watch more of the recordings."

"About the recordings," Emi asked. "Does it magically translate? I assume they don't speak English in an alternate universe and it would explain why everyone's speech is out of synch, like a seventies kung fu movie."

"That's exactly right," Jason said. "They weren't much more expensive than regular ones, and you were the intended audience, so I had to. The hardest part was calibrating the crystals to English, which took ages."

"How did you talk to people there in person? Did you have a magic translator item?"

"I'm pretty good with languages," Jason said.

"Is that so?" Emi asked in Japanese. "Mother told me that you were bratty about learning when you were at my age."

Jason was getting better at paying attention to when he was switching languages and taking more active control over it.

“Your mother and your Uncle Kaito used to talk behind my back, except right in front of me using Japanese,” Jason said, also in Japanese

“You do speak it! You sound a little like the translation recording crystals, though. Do you have a translation power?”

“I do.”

“What languages can it do?”

“All of them, as far as I’m aware.”

“You’re going to find anime dubs even more annoying now, I guess. Okay, next question: Your friend Gary is really furry. Does he give good hugs?”

“Oh, they’re amazing,” Jason said. “It’s like being wrapped in a blanket made of friendship. But not as weird and creepy as I make it sound.”

## Chapter 301

### I'm Mysterious Now

On the way back from picking Emi up at school, Jason suggested they take advantage of the warm day. Casselton had pleasant winters as it were and the afternoon temperature had climbed into the high twenties. The unseasonable heat was begging the beach town's residents into the cool waters of the Pacific.

On hearing that Jason didn't have any swimwear, Emi had insisted on stopping to pick some up. CB Surf and Bike sold mostly surf gear in the summer and mountain bike accessories during the winter. Most of the winter tourism was from mountain bikers taking advantage of the mild weather and preponderance of bush trails that snaked through the Casselton region.

That left a limited selection of surf wear, given the season, but it was not an issue to pick up some boardshorts. He also grabbed rash shirts for himself and his niece, which would cover up his scars as well as protect them from abrasions if they took a spill during the surprise Jason had planned.

On reaching the houseboat, Emi's own swimwear and a change of clothes was retrieved from her house via portal. She and Jason were soon skimming across the water on a pair of black jet skis, heading away from the marina. They moved parallel to the shore, past the big houses with small private docks and the scraggly stretch of bush where kids were playing in the creek outlet. The kids looked up as Emi whooped and hollered at them from the back of her jet ski, returning Emi's wave.

Jason and Emi continued on, out in front of the small town's eponymous beach. It looked like they weren't the only ones taking advantage of the heat after school, with the white, sandy shore full enough that the Surf Life Saving Club had people out on full patrol. They rode their jet skis into the shore, leaving them as they wandered up to the caravan park tuck shop across the road and Jason purchased them an ice cream each.

Emi was approached by some of her friends who were also at the beach. Emi had lived in Casselton Beach for a year and, like both of her uncles, was quick to make friends. She happily showed off the jet skis, which rapidly cemented Jason as the cool uncle. Emi and Jason took off again, Jason steering them back toward the houseboat when Shade informed him that Erika was wrapping up at work. Jason and Emi each claimed a bathroom to shower in, emerging not long before Erika's arrival.

"You need to talk to Mum," Erika told him as she stepped from the pier onto the lower deck.

"I'm fine, thanks for asking," Jason said. "Yourself?"

"She's been calling me constantly since yesterday," Erika said. "If she weren't dealing with all of Nanna's stuff she wouldn't leave me alone at all."

"When can we go see Grand Nanna?" Emi asked emerging from the houseboat to join them on the lower deck.

"Tomorrow," Erika told her. "I'll pick you up from school and we'll go straight out to Great Uncle Robbo's farm."

"Can't we just teleport?" Emi asked.

"Sorry, Moppet," Jason said, ruffling her wet hair. "I've got an important meeting tomorrow."

"Uncle Jason," Emi complained, straightening her hair with her fingers.

"Erika, I'm a little surprised you didn't send Mum here," Jason said.

"Oh yeah, to the magic houseboat made of clouds," Erika said. "As if springing your resurrection on her at the hospital wasn't bad enough. I know you and Mum have issues, but dragging this out is just being a dick."

"Mum, you said a bad word," Emi said.

"Emi," Erika said. "What did I tell you about swearing?"

"That it's an arbitrary assignment of negative value to words with no inherent negative value based on outmoded moral strictures," Emi groaned.

"Good girl," Erika said.

"You know my teachers don't see it that way," Emi muttered.

"That's why you have to use your judgement," Erika said. "Social context is important. At Uncle Robbo's farm you hear all kinds of words not appropriate for the school setting."

"Uncle Robbo keeps trying to get me to drink beer," Emi said. "I'm not sure that's a healthy educational environment."

"He used to do that to me too," Jason said, then switched to a gravelly voice. "Go on, Jason, just a sip. It'll put hair on your chest."

"He said the exact same thing to me," Erika laughed.

"I don't want hair on my chest," Emi said. "Also, beer definitely doesn't do that."

"Alright, Emi," Erika said. "I need to talk with your uncle for a bit, so go get a start on your homework."

Emi grumbled but retrieved her school bag and made her way up to the top deck while Erika and Jason went inside.

“I’ve curated the next set of recording crystals to avoid things Emi isn’t ready for,” Jason said. “I’ve set the crystals out in the media room, so once Dad and Ian get here, you can dive straight in while I go see Mum.”

“What is it that you’ve taken out?” Erika asked.

“Some of the things I did. And were done to me. The real nasty stuff isn’t until later, but I don’t think Emi is ready for my ruminations on the ethics of killing people. Especially since those early ones are me being foolish and naïve about it.”

Erika frowned.

“Then you really did...?”

“Yeah.”

“A lot?”

“Yeah.”

The brother and sister looked at each other in silence for a long time.

“With everything going on around you after coming back,” Erika finally said, “I’m not sure if I asked you how you’re doing. Are you okay, Jason?”

“Being home helps,” he said. “I had a good talk with Dad. I spent a few hours out at his hill.”

“You visited the dirt pile,” Erika said. “You can see how many years it’ll take to get that into any kind of reasonable shape.”

“It’s certainly ambitious,” Jason said. “I think it might go faster than you think, though.”

“You’re talking about magic?” Erika asked. “I can’t believe I’m talking about magic like it’s a regular thing. You know you’ve turned my life insane, right?”

“I know.”

“When will you tell Kaito everything?” Erika asked.

“I’m not sure. I’m hoping to get a much better understanding of the local situation tomorrow, after which I’ll be in a better position to make decisions going forward.”

“Alright,” Erika said. “Jason, about those crystals you didn’t want Emi to see.”

“Shade has them,” Jason said. “Just ask and he’ll give them to you.”

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Jason sat in his mother’s darkened apartment watching a crystal recording that heavily featured Farrah. Her guidance had been so important to him in his early days in the other world, although it wasn’t until after she died that he realised how often she had been right and he had been wrong. It hadn’t stopped him from running his mouth, as projecting confidence had never been an issue for him, even when he had none.

Shade told Jason that his mother was arriving and he shut off the recording, returning the projector to his inventory.

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Cheryl trudged from her car into the elevator, her head swirling with revelations and stress. She hadn't been into the office in two days, which was completely unlike her, even over the weekend. After her mother's miraculous recovery, she had been spending her time at Robert's farm, helping her mother get settled.

As if that weren't enough, her dead son had returned to life, only to vanish on her all over again. After the shellshock revelation at the hospital, she had been trying to get more information out of her other children. Kaito didn't seem to know any more than Cheryl herself, while Erika was being obstructionist. Her own daughter refused to tell her where she could find the son impossibly risen from the grave, with their last few phone calls devolving into screaming matches.

She tapped the key card to access her apartment.

"You don't need to bother with the alarm," a voice said as she stepped inside. "It's already off."

Her son's voice was deeper than before. She looked at the silhouette sitting in the dark in one of her arm chairs. She flicked on the light, revealing him in full. She had only seen him briefly in the hospital, but now she started cataloguing the changes. Along with his voice was the beard and the small scars on his face. The eyes were the same, dark and hostile.

"Son."

"Mother."

"I thought I lost you."

"You did," Jason said, getting up out of the chair.

She moved forward to hug him, only to be struck by a wave of dread that sent her staggering back. Her hair stood up on end as her instincts screamed danger, until the sensation passed. Looking around, there was no indication of what had caused the sensation, yet she was certain it had come from her son.

"What was that?" she asked, rattled.

"Explanations will come," he said. "Not tonight."

She was unsure of what to do with herself, standing in the middle of the room but not willing to try moving forward again.

"How did you even get in here?" she asked.

"Mysteriously," he said. "I'm mysterious now."

She was having a hard time recognising her own son, but she caught a glimpse of the boy she remembered in the moment of silliness.

“Jason, after you died...”

“You still had the son you liked, so no big loss.”

“How can you say that?” she asked.

“Years of observational evidence. Kaito and Amy I get. We made choices that hurt each other. Their choices a lot more than mine, but we were all young and stupid. It took me a long time to get there, but I’m ready to try forgiving them. It’s not as easy as I thought it would be – I haven’t moved past it as much as I thought – but I can do it.”

He shook his head.

“But you,” he continued. “You weren’t young. You weren’t mired in hormones, love and friendship all tangled up in a rat’s nest. You were meant to be the detached one. I know parents have favourites, Mum, but you could have tried to hide it at least a little.”

“What I was trying to do was hold the family together through what was obviously going to be a crisis.”

“And how did you do it? The same way you did everything: by stepping on me.”

“It’s not like that, Jason.”

“I know you loved me, Mum,” Jason said, voice dropping soft and low as he bowed his head. “But I also know that you really didn’t like me.”

“That isn’t how it was, Jason.”

“You think I’m pulling that out of thin air? You spent twenty years showing me how you felt.”

“You weren’t the easiest child, Jason.”

“Oh, I didn’t realise it was hard,” Jason said. “That’s egg on my face, I guess. Sorry, just forget everything I said, then. Good seeing you, Mum.”

She skittered out of the way as he made for the door and opened it.

“I came back home for reconciliation,” he said softly, pausing in the doorway. “I know I haven’t helped, here, but there were things I needed to say before I had any chance of moving forward.”

Cheryl steeled her nerve and rushed at her son, grasping him tightly in a hug.

“My boy has come back to me,” she whispered, sending a shudder through his body.

“You need to stop bothering Erika,” he said softly as he extricated himself. “I’ll be around for a while, so look after Nanna. We’ll see each other again soon.”

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Ken and Ian left the houseboat after another session of watching recording crystals, Ian taking Emi home with him. Erika remained behind, watching one of the recording crystals she retrieved from Shade. The recording was of Jason in what she had come to recognise as his lodgings in the strange, magical city he had been living in.

"I killed some people today," image Jason said. "They weren't the first, and they were coming to kill us. I was on a job, escorting a shipment of magic coins."

He laughed, shaking his head in disbelief.

"This is my life, now. We were in these amazing sand skimmers, which is like an airboat, but for sand. Then we got attacked by – get this – sand pirates! Crazy right? They swept in and we fought them off. It was awesome."

He hung his head.

"It wasn't until after I got back that it occurred to me that I'd just killed eight people. And it was fun. Fun. Even now, I have trouble feeling bad about it. It's not like they were going to let us live, but protecting ourselves should be a grim necessity, right?"

He sighed.

"I'm starting to become afraid of what I'm turning into. What happens when I stop caring about human life altogether? I'm dangerous now. If I ever get home, will you even recognise the person I've become?"

The recording came to an end and Erika sat staring into the space it had been. Caught up in her thoughts, she was startled when Shade appeared at the door.

"Mrs Asano, your brother will shortly be arriving in the lounge."

She was waiting for Jason when he appeared through a portal arch.

"You saw Mum?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"You didn't show her the crazy teleport door, did you?"

"Of course not."

"Because I'm still processing all of this," Erika said. "Emi's young and she adapts quickly, but Ian and I are feeling pretty adrift."

"I know," Jason said. "The world is a different place, now."

Erika thought back to the troubled boy on the recording, afraid of what his family would see in him. The man in front of her was certainly changed. For good or ill, she didn't know.

"How did you cope in that place?" she asked. "You were completely alone."

"I wasn't," Jason said. "There were friends to help me. True companions, life and death. Rufus, Gary, Jory, Humphrey. Did you get to the recordings with Clive, yet?"

“You didn’t mention Farrah,” Erika said. “That seems odd given that she clearly was a mentor, even if you were the same age. Did you and her...?”

“No. She was very important to me, a teacher and a friend. Neither of us wanted more than that.”

“That Cassandra woman seems to pop up a bit. You didn’t mention her, either.”

“That we wanted,” Jason said. “She dumped me, eventually. Spoiler alert.”

“You want to talk about it?”

“Actually, yeah,” Jason said. “I’d like that.”

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After Erika left, Jason sat on the top deck, reading from one of Farrah’s more basic theory texts on magical formations. The heat of the day had cooled with the coming of night but it was still a pleasant evening. In any case, Jason’s bronze-rank body would take a considerable amount of cold to be uncomfortable. His phone rang and he looked at the listed caller.

“Anna,” Jason greeted as he answered. “Last minute scheduling conflict?”

“I wanted to talk about the other outworlder,” Annabeth said and Jason sat up in his chair.

“What about them?”

“I know that getting them out of the Lyon branch’s hands is important to you. We’ve managed to get the international committee to agree to pressure the Lyon branch, but the Network isn’t one large hierarchy. It’s a network of old secret societies and the international committee is more like a United Nations than an overlord. The branches are members, not subordinates, so they can only put as much pressure on Lyon as the members are willing to accept.”

“I get it,” Jason said. “You’re looking for a demonstration that my cooperation is valuable enough for this committee of yours to go to bat for me.”

“That’s exactly what I’m looking for,” Annabeth said. “If you have something like that for us tomorrow, we can get the ball rolling.”

“As it happens, I did prepare something,” Jason said. “I’ll send you a cloud drive link.”

Moments later, Annabeth had her phone on speaker as she scrolled through a file on the screen.

“Is this what I think it is?” she asked.

“Thousands of known essence combinations, plus some basic notes on the general tendencies of those combinations.”

Jason's living documents of Magic Society knowledge on monsters and essences wouldn't update while in another universe, but the information already recorded was more than enough to be going on with. In preparation for the meeting, Jason had Shade transcribe the contents of the magic tablet into a digital document.

"Is that the kind of gesture you're talking about?" Jason asked.

"Yeah," Annabeth said. "This will do nicely."

## Chapter 302

### Hardline Position

Jason woke early, did his weight training and then went through his combat training. Now that Shade was able to exert an amount of physical force, he could leverage his knowledge of Jason's martial art style to use multiple bodies and spar as part of advancing Jason's skill set. As Jason's skills progressed, Shade was moving into more big-picture aspects of the training.

"You need to develop your skills in a different direction to Miss Wexler," Shade said. "She uses the versatility of the style to develop what is essentially a specialty variant tailored directly to her proclivities and capabilities. There is no way she can remember the vast breadth of techniques that the style includes, but her focus gives her a specialised expertise."

"She's been practising since she was a child," Jason said. "I can't match that experience with anything but time, skill book or no."

"Indeed," Shade said. "Your personal advantage is that you are learning the style more in line with the original intention."

"Oh?" Jason prompted.

"As should be clear from the skill books retrieved during the Reaper trials, the Order of the Reaper's techniques are designed foundationally to include skill book use. Developing that many techniques to a useable state simply isn't possible without the memory-enhancement that comes of a high-rank spirit attribute. At your rank, skill books are the only way. Of course, incorporating those skills requires a specialised training regimen in and of itself, which Mr Remore was serendipitously able to provide."

"So I should be leaning into the breadth of techniques, rather than nailing down favourites like Sophie?"

"Precisely," Shade said. "Versatility and adaptability should be your watchwords. As we continue to practise, I will endeavour to bring out your full range of techniques."

After combat training, Jason went for a run. His bronze-rank speed and stamina attributes allowed him to set a relatively distant destination like Castle Bluff. Making his way out of town, he was pounding along next to the highway when a car passed in the other direction before it turned around and drove up to him. Jason's enhanced perception had allowed him to recognise the driver as his old friend Greg, who he hadn't seen since heading for university in Melbourne, while Greg had gone to Sydney.

"Jason?" Greg asked disbelievingly after pulling over and getting out of the car.

“G’day Greg,” Jason said. “It’s been a while.”

“Since you left for Melbourne or since you died?”

“Both, I guess,” Jason said. “How’ve you been, mate?”

“Alive. Consistently. What is a dead guy doing running along a highway in the middle of nowhere?”

“Fitness and wellbeing,” Jason said. “I’m bit of an exercise nut, now.”

“Where are you going?”

“Just running out to Castle Bluff and back.”

“That’s something like thirty kilometres.”

“Why do you think I was running fast?”

Greg rubbed his temples.

“This is insane,” he said to himself. “I’m going insane. I got in a car accident and now I’m in some weird purgatory with my dead friend and his surprisingly toned calves.”

“Okay, Greg, just calm down, mate. Take a deep breath.”

“Says the revenant from beyond the grave!”

“Okay, look. I’ve got an important meeting, later, so I need to get going, but let’s swap digits and I’ll give you a call. We can hang out.”

“Oh, we can hang out,” Greg said. “HOW ARE YOU ALIVE?”

“Because of the mystic powers I obtained in a magical alternate universe.”

Greg shook his head.

“I see you haven’t changed. Except for the beard. That does a really good job of breaking the lines of your chin. Or did you have some work done?”

“I did not have any work done!”

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Annabeth was making final preparations to leave when a woman in her mid twenties knocked on the open door. She was wearing an elegant pantsuit, which stood out considerably more than the bland, off-the-rack varieties the Network typically mandated. It was not an outfit that would be mistaken as the garb of a mid-level government worker. Her Mediterranean heritage had left her with a swarthy skin tone and dark hair, which were set off attractively by the maroon of her outfit.

“Miss Karadeniz,” Annabeth greeted, continuing to transfer items from her desk to her briefcase. “What brings you back to Sydney from the vaunted heights of the International Committee office?”

“The IC wants a representative in this negotiation. And please, Anna, since when is it Miss Karadeniz?”

“But you’re all fancy now,” Annabeth said with a smile.

“I was always fancy,” Asya said, causing Anna to chuckle.

“It seems odd that they sent someone from magitech research,” Annabeth said.

“I’m just an administrator,” Asya said. “My job is to keep the people doing the real work happy and funded.”

“Don’t you come from the Mid North Coast?” Annabeth asked.

“That’s why I requested the slot,” Asya said. “I actually went to school with Jason Asano.”

“Seriously?”

“Oh, yes. I even had bit of a thing for him, but he was obsessed with some basic white girl. There’s no accounting for taste.”

“You can offer us some insight, then,” Annabeth said. “Contrast him with his pre-magic self.”

“That’s why they approved the assignment, although it has been a number of years. I went to his memorial service, so I was quite startled to hear his name in relation to the Sydney incident.”

“You’ve read the reports?”

“Oh yes,” Asya said. “His showing up in your kitchen was interesting. I wouldn’t be too worried about reading it as a threat. He always did like to unbalance others for social advantage. Also, he’s unlikely to despoil a kitchen.”

“Glad to hear it. About my wife; I don’t particularly care about the kitchen.”

Asya laughed.

“I’m more interested in the paintings he obtained from your wife,” she said.

“You think they matter?” Annabeth asked. “I figured it was just a power play, to show us we aren’t untouchable.”

“Jason prefers having more than one reason to do a thing,” Asya said. “Both paintings were by the same artist, as your wife no doubt told you.”

“Yeah, some kind of wannabe Banksy, playing it all mysterious.”

“I’d appreciate if you could task some people with looking into the artist more closely.”

“I can do that,” Annabeth said and fished out her phone to make a call.

“Aram,” she greeted. “Do a deep dive into the artist whose paintings Asano purchased from my wife. Dawn, that’s the one. Thanks.”

Annabeth returned her phone to her pocket.

“Done,” Annabeth said.

Keith arrived outside the office.

“Miss Karadeniz, always a pleasure.”

Annabeth’s office had been Keith’s when Asya was still a member of the Sydney branch.

“Mr Culpeper,” Asya greeted.

“Anna,” Keith said. “How would you feel about riding up the coast with Miss Karadeniz? The contingent has grown sufficiently that an extra car might not be a bad idea.”

“How many people are we up to now?” Annabeth asked.

“There’s us three,” Keith said, “plus the government liaison.”

“Who did they send?” Annabeth asked.

“Gordon Truffett,” Keith said.

Annabeth and Asya both groaned.

“He’s not that bad,” Keith said, at which both women gave him a flat look. “Okay, he’s a little pushy.”

“Why would they pick someone like him?” Annabeth asked.

“I heard he’s close to the Prime Minister,” Asya said.

“The Prime Minister chose him personally,” Keith confirmed.

“Then I will ride with you, Asya. If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

“Who else?”

“Gladys is coming along,” Keith said. “She’s going to check in on Asano’s grandmother. We’re also bringing Nigel.”

“What for?” Annabeth asked.

“We suspect Asano has a means to advance without monster cores. I thought bringing our own non-core obsessive might prompt Asano to open up.”

Annabeth and Asya had also never used monster cores, but that was a matter of policy. All executive-level Network personnel were given essences to raise them to category one, but cores were mostly saved for the lower-ranked enforcement team members who served on the frontline of Network activity. Only committee members like Keith were raised up to category two with cores.

“That’s a good idea,” Asya said. “Jason could be quite passionate when he got caught up in something. Nigel might get him to drop some useful nuggets without costing us any concessions.”

“How well do you know him, exactly?” Keith asked.

“It’s been a long time,” Asya said. “I think making too many assumptions based on the way he was seven years ago has the potential to cause more mistakes than playing it by ear.”

“Probably sensible,” Keith said. “Shall we go, then?”

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While Keith’s car was an unremarkable sedan with government plates, Asya’s car had the appearance of a 1962 MGA Roadster. It was another hot day and they had the soft top down, Annabeth and Asya enjoying the coastal drive.

“So you’re from Casselton Beach?” Annabeth asked.

“Definitely not,” Asya. “I’m not poor.”

Annabeth gave her a sideways glance.

“My family didn’t invent capitalism,” Asya said unashamedly. “We just won it. Of course, I know my way around Casselton Beach. It’s where all the interesting boys came from. Children are so often tedious.”

Annabeth gave Asya another look.

“I won’t apologise for being exceptional amongst my peers,” Asya said.

As they reached the outskirts of Casselton Beach, Annabeth started feeling slightly ill. Gladys called her on the phone.

“Are you feeling that?” Gladys asked as Anna put the phone on speaker.

“You too?” Annabeth asked.

“I’m pretty sure it’s worse for me. I think something’s wrong with the magic, here.”

“Was it like this when you were here last time?”

“I didn’t come here last time,” Gladys said. “The hospital is in a different town.”

Annabeth turned to Asya.

“Is there something weird with the magic in this town?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Asya said. “I’ve been here since getting essences, but there wasn’t anything like this.”

“Maybe Vermillion will have answers,” Annabeth said.

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Vermillion’s home was a mansion nestled amongst rich bushland, just a few minutes out of Casselton Beach. The Network negotiation team arrived at his place prior to the meeting and he met them in his wide driveway. Asya parked her car, got out and gave Vermillion a quick hug.

“This is where the Burman family used to live,” Asya said. “The first time I ever got drunk was in this house.”



“Small world,” Vermillion said. “How’s the car treating you?”

“Oh, I love it,” Asya said. “I did have a few modifications made.”

“I could tell,” Vermillion said. “That engine noise is artificial, right?”

“No slipping anything past you,” Asya told him.

“If that were true, I’d still be in Sydney,” Vermillion said. “I am finding this to be a nice change of pace, though, and if it’s excitement I want, I suspect that Jason will provide more than enough, sooner or later.”

“Do you know what’s responsible for the magical deficit in Casselton Beach?” Keith asked.

“That’s Jason,” Vermillion said. “He apparently decided to monopolise the local magic. Fortunately, this place is just outside the field of magic consumption. I don’t want to fall into a torpor like those crusty old world vampires.”

“So, what do we do about the magic?” Keith asked. “It put me through a loop, and I’m only category two. I hate to think what Ms Erstweller will go through.”

“I can tough it out,” Gladys said.

“It won’t be a problem,” Craig said. “While most of the town is magically anaemic, you’ll find Jason’s houseboat to be quite comfortable.”

“He’s concentrating the magic on his house boat?” Keith asked. “How?”

“Magically, I’d assume,” Asya said. “Shall we go?”

For the trip from Vermillion’s place, the government liaison, Gordon, was displaced from the front passenger seat to make room for Vermillion. Despite his protests, he wound up in the middle of the back seat between Gladys and Nigel the combat trainer.

“What exactly is your purpose in this negotiation?” Gordon asked Gladys unhappily.

“I’m here to keep you alive when Asano pimp slaps you across the room,” Gladys said.

“You do seem to lack a basic sense of self-preservation, Mr Truffett,” Vermillion said. “Most people would be wary about offending a category three, given that they could pull you apart like toffee on a hot day.”

“Asano had something that I don’t understand, medically,” Gladys said. “He has scars.”

“Why is that unusual?” Keith asked from the driver seat.

“You don’t get into any fights, so you probably wouldn’t know,” Gladys said. “Nigel, you were a soldier. Have any scars?”

“Used to,” Nigel said. “During the change when I ascended to category one they went away. Now I don’t get them, no matter how bad the injury. Magically or naturally healed, they don’t leave a mark.”

“I’m curious as to what kind of injury leaves a permanent mark on one of us,” Gladys said. “I’d rather know what does it ahead of time than figure it out after some of our people run into it.”

“And we front-liners appreciate the concern,” Nigel said.

It only took a few minutes to drive into Casselton Beach and down to the marina.

“Is that thing Asano’s houseboat?” Annabeth asked as she stepped out of Asya’s roadster.

“Now we’re talking,” Asya said. “I wonder where he picked it up?”

“I suspect availability is limited,” Vermillion said as he got out of Keith’s sedan.

They made their way along the dock to find an eerie shadow figure waiting on the lower deck. It had the shape of a man wearing a cloak. but seemed to have a negative presence. It was as if instead of existing, it was a hole in the fabric of the universe.

“I am Shade,” it said in a cold, oddly British voice. “Given the warmth of the day, Mr Asano is taking a swim after his morning run. Please come aboard.”

The Network group glanced at one another while Vermillion stepped aboard.

“Hello, Shade,” he said.

“Good day, Mr Vermillion.”

The others stepped onto the lower deck and felt a sensation like stepping from the desert heat into an air conditioned room.

“Oh, wow,” Gladys said. “It’s like I just ate a spirit coin.”

“You should find the condition on board quite acceptable,” Shade said. “Please follow me.”

The group followed the floating shadow around the lower deck to the far side of the houseboat where they found Asano relaxing on a pitch black air mattress in the water. He was wearing only a pair of boardshorts, with his toned torso marred with scars on full display. The peppering of smaller scars were dominated by a large, ugly line running from his right hip, across his abdomen and around his left midsection. It looked like the kind of wound that a person was unlikely to survive to have scar over.

The air mattress turned onto a cloud of darkness and Asano vanished into it, immediately emerging from their shadowy guide like he was stepping through a door. He grabbed a towel hanging on the deck rail, rubbing it over his head before draping it over his shoulders.

“Best come in, then,” he said, moving up to the tinted glass wall, which slid open to access the bar lounge. “Lovely to see you, Asya. If I recall correctly, you had ambitions to join ASUS.”

“I was headhunted for a more exciting opportunity,” Asya said as the group followed him in. The interior of the houseboat simply but expensively appointed in white leather and rich wood.

“I can imagine,” Jason said, moving behind the bar. “Fighting monsters is definitely more exciting than exploiting our international neighbours to enrich the government’s corporate donors.”

“I have to protest to that description,” Gordon said.

“Protest away,” Jason said, putting a series of glasses on the bar and scooping ice into them. “Who are you, exactly?”

“I represent the government in these negotiations. Gordon Truffett.”

“Well, now you’re Other Gordon,” Jason said. “I’ve already got a Gordon, and he’s more important than you.”

“Is this how you start a negotiation?” Other Gordon asked indignantly.

“You’re right,” Jason said. “Give and take is part of the process. Hey, Gordon.”

Another dark, cloaked figure appeared, although this one was quite different to Shade, who seemed to have vanished when no one was looking. The new presence was a disembodied cloak, within which swirled an eye-shaped nebula. Four glowing orbs floated around it.

“This guy thinks you should be Other Gordon,” Jason said, pulling a large pitcher from one of the two large refrigerators. Gordon responded by turning on Other Gordon, making a slow, menacing approach. Nigel stepped between them.

“Alright, Gordon,” Jason said and the figure vanished. “Sorry, Other Gordon. Looks like actual Gordon’s taking a hardline position.”

Other Gordon was holding himself stable with a white-knuckle grip on the back of a chair. Jason poured lemonade into each of the glasses, taking an approving sip. Vermillion and Asya took glasses without hesitating.

“This lemonade is incredible,” Asya said. “I definitely want to stock some of this. Where did you get it from?”

“Lemons,” Jason said. “The secret is to put the lemon peel in with the sugar for about twelve hours so the sugar soaks up the fruit oil. That’s where the flavour is. Now, I need to show Anna how to make a proper sandwich, but we can talk while I do. Why don’t we start with introductions?”

## Chapter 303

### Otherwise Best Avoided

“I think we should start,” Keith said, “by getting everyone on the same page in terms of who we are and what we do.”

“I think that’s my cue to go,” Vermillion said. “Now that the meeting has been facilitated without anyone trying to kidnap anyone else, I’ll bow out to allow you to share secrets without concerning yourselves over a third party.”

“Thanks, Craig,” Jason said. “We’ll catch up later, yeah? Hang on; I’ll put your sandwich in some paper.”

Jason wrapped Vermillion a sandwich and Shade escorted the vampire away, leaving Jason with the Network contingent. Jason was standing behind the bar while the others had taken seats at Jason’s invitation.

“How about I get the ball rolling?” Jason said, continuing to assemble sandwiches. “We can go through my story, I can tell you what I’ve figured out about your little club and then we can do questions and corrections as you tell me about yourselves.”

“Before we begin,” Gladys said, “I’d like to ask about your scars. My understanding is that scars shouldn’t be possible for people like us.”

“Why is that?” Jason asked.

“Because we heal using the soul as a template,” Gladys said.

“Doesn’t that answer your question?” Jason asked.

“Wait,” Gladys said. “You’re saying that your soul is scarred?”

“I think marked might be a more accurate term,” Jason said. “Soul scars are usually what they call it in the other universe but I have more experience with this than most. The soul is a resilient thing and it can’t truly be harmed by external forces. Even the most extreme, which I have tested quite thoroughly.”

“Then what causes those marks?” Gladys asked.

“Your soul is who you are, at the core,” Jason said. “Some experiences change you, fundamentally. Standing against an enemy you didn’t think you could survive. Enduring a tribulation you thought would annihilate you. The scars left behind might be from the wounds you suffered, but the reality is that you put them there yourself.”

“Psychological scars made manifest,” Gladys reasoned.

“Something like that,” Jason said. “I spent some time with a healer well-versed in soul trauma. I learned a lot from him.”

“What about that tattoo on your back?” Nigel asked. “We use magic tattoos ourselves, but nothing that elaborate.”

“I’ve used a regular magic tattoo in the past,” Jason said. “I lost it when I ranked up to bronze. From category one to two.”

“The same happens with ours,” Nigel said.

“This one on my back is different,” Jason said. “It’s called a personal crest and it’s a physical representation of my soul. It allows me to prove that I’m me, regardless of how much my aura might change. It’s impossible to replicate, as far as I’m aware, which stops some shape-shifter from assuming my identity. Of course, that’s only if someone checks it. If a dragon takes my shape to steal biscuits, for example, then people probably won’t go to the bother.”

The Network team shared uncertain looks.

“Dragon?” Annabeth asked.

“His name’s Stash. Adorable little fellow, but he does get up to mischief.”

“You expect us to believe in dragons?” Other Gordon asked.

“Mate, I got sucked through a dimensional flare into an alternate universe. If you’re going to balk at the first magical creature that comes along, then you might as well just sit there quietly and be grateful your name isn’t Other Colin.”

“What?”

“I think, Mr Truffett,” Keith said, “we might be best served by listening instead of talking.”

“Can I get a better look at your tattoo?” Asya asked.

“I’m not sure turning my back on you lot is the smartest choice,” Jason said, “but okay.”

He came out from behind the bar and turned around, giving them a clear view. The crest took up his entire back, depicting a starry night sky dominated by a disembodied cloak. It was not unlike Gordon in appearance, except that instead of an eye-shaped nebula there was a bright, daylight sky contained within it. The crest shimmered and moved slightly as they observed it. After a moment, Jason turned back around and retook his position behind the bar.

“That’s what your soul looks like?” Asya asked.

“From the outside,” Jason said. “From the inside it’s more like a garden.”

“You’ve seen the inside of your soul?” Gladys asked.

“I’ve had some experiences that have developed my capacity for self-reflection,” Jason said. “I’m sure we can talk about the specifics at a later date. What you need to

know now is that I went to a magical alternate universe, died a couple of times, obtained magical power and knowledge and came home.”

“What do you mean, died?” Annabeth said.

“Dead. Croaked. Shuffled off. Do I have to do the whole parrot sketch? The important thing is that I came back stronger every time, so I’d advise against killing me.”

“That’s quite a claim,” Keith said. “I don’t suppose you have any way of substantiating it?”

“Mate, it’s death; you don’t get a receipt. I don’t think. Shade...?”

“No,” Shade said.

“Shade’s dad is in charge of the afterlife,” Jason said. “He refuses to tell me what happens to souls when they die, though. My personal recollection is hazy at best.”

“That is not for the living to know,” Shade said.

“What do you mean, in charge of the afterlife?” Annabeth asked.

“Are you familiar with great astral beings? They’re kind of like super gods. Your regular gods, that you’ll find on any world with enough magic, are on a scale of your Zeus, Odin, etc. Great astral beings operate on more of a cosmic scale. That’s your ‘knocking out a universe in seven days’ crowd. Shade’s progenitor is the Reaper, who takes charge of the dead. We haven’t met, but he seems like a stand up guy. He might be a little cross with me because I keep dodging him, though.”

“These are some outrageous claims you’re making,” Annabeth said. “Even by our standards.”

“Which means you’re either telling us fibs,” Asya said, “or giving us insights into some of the most fundamental questions about reality.”

Jason flashed her a grin.

“Stick with me and I’ll show you the cosmos,” he said.

“I might just hold you to that,” Asya said.

“Do you have the means to travel between worlds?” Annabeth asked.

“No,” Jason said. “My journey was unexpected, in both directions. I am, however, going to find one.”

“You told one of my people that there was more than one other world,” Annabeth said.

“Yes,” Jason confirmed, “although I only visited the one. I don’t know much about the others. What’s relevant to our dealings here is what I brought back with me. I have a few material resources, but that’s a minor matter. More important to us all is the knowledge.”

“What kind of knowledge?” Keith asked.

“Before I go into that,” Jason said, “I’d like to explore your side of things for a moment, now that we’ve discussed mine. Let me begin by going over what I’ve been able to surmise about your Network.”

“Please do,” Keith said. “I’m curious as to what an outsider has been able to piece together.”

“Well, I think the seeds of your organisation were planted somewhere in the vicinity of half a millennium ago, probably by one or more outworlders who roamed around founding secret societies. These secret societies were most likely predicated on the existence of essences, although that’s a guess. At that time, I imagine there were few, if any opportunities to encounter monsters or other magical resources. Essences were probably hoarded and used by only a few, maybe even one person for each of the secret societies.”

“Did you get this information from Vermillion?” Annabeth asked.

“Some of it,” Jason said. “I filled in a lot of the blanks he didn’t know myself. Now, I’m guessing that when these secret societies were founded, they were each given access to something. Some means of detecting and interceding in certain magical events. Events that either began happening or started to significantly escalate in frequency, somewhere around the turn of the twentieth century.”

“That’s not inaccurate,” Keith said.

“The incidents in question are, I’m assuming, the formation of short-lived, proto-astral spaces. I’m not sure what you call them locally, but I’m talking about unstable dimensional pockets attached to the world. I’ve only encountered the stable variant myself, although I have studied the theory.”

“We call them dimensional incursions,” Annabeth said. “The primary purpose of the Network is to find the incursions, enter them and prevent the entities there from making it into our world.”

“How does that work?” Jason asked.

“Each incursion contains a number of hostile entities,” Annabeth explained.

“Monsters,” Jason said.

“We use the term dimensional entity, or DE,” Annabeth said. “We send tactical teams to eliminate them. The secondary entities are inconsequential, but each incident has one or more of what we call an anchor dimensional entity, or ADE. If we take it or them out, then whatever is left disappears into the ether when the incursion space breaks down.”

“How long does that take?” Jason asked.

“Forty-three hours, as a baseline. Slightly longer with a more powerful ADE, but fifty-one is the record. That was with a category four ADE.”

“Gold rank?” Jason asked. “You have people strong enough for that?”

“There has only been one category four incursion to date,” Annabeth said. “It took a small army of category three tactical personnel plus a large amount of military firepower to handle it.”

“We’ve been working on magically enhanced heavy ordnance ever since,” Asya said. “We aren’t equipped to tackle an increase in incursions of that level, though.”

“When we fail to eliminate the ADE,” Nigel said, “any DEs still around when the incursion space breaks down are injected into our world.”

“We’ve prevented this in all but a few, isolated incidents,” Keith said. “Luckily, they were each in remote locations where there were minimal casualties and we were able to cover. Mostly.”

“We use the incursion space to harvest magical materials,” Asya explained. “Those materials are critical to maintaining our ability to resist incursion events. Essences and awakening stones are the most valuable materials, as you might imagine.”

“Over the last century,” Annabeth said, “both the number and strength of the incursions have been escalating, just as you said. We’ve managed to keep up thus far, given that more powerful incursion spaces mean better harvests. We’re reaching the point where we don’t have the resources to raise our people beyond category three. There’s been talk of pooling resources to try and get a small number of our most exceptional people worldwide to category four, but negotiations aren’t going well.”

“Trouble choosing which branch gets the category fours?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Keith said. “The obvious solution is to place them directly under the command of the International Committee and dispatch them globally at need. Unfortunately, the more powerful branches in the US, China and Russia are pushing back on that. Since they are the primary source of spirit coins, they can’t just be ignored.”

“You don’t have spirit coin farms,” Jason said. “That makes sense. Earth doesn’t have the magic and coin formation takes months, so you can’t do it in the proto-astral spaces. Are you getting your coins from loot powers?”

“Yes,” Keith said. “And the major powers make a point of trying to poach anyone who gets such a power to maintain their monopoly. They offer the kind of terms that are hard to turn down, although naturally many do. None of the Australian branches currently have anyone with a looting power.”

The others all turned an unfriendly glare on Other Gordon.

“The last two we had,” Keith said, “the government facilitated their exchange to the US, in return for political concessions.”



“Not even something that would help us do our job,” Anna said.

“Those deals were made in good faith,” Other Gordon defended.

“You’re not on TV, Truffett,” Annabeth said. “Don’t bother with the transparent lies.”

“Obviously, what we want from you,” Keith said, turning back to Jason, “is anything that will help us deal with the incursions. If you really do have a looting power, then supplying us with spirit coins is something we would be more than willing to demonstrate our appreciation of.”

“The real holy grail is the category three bottleneck, though,” Asya said. “If any of that knowledge you brought back can help our people reach category four, we’ll give you whatever you want. Enough hard currency to sink a container ship. Exemption from polygamy laws. Bora Bora.”

“Miss Karadeniz may be somewhat exaggerating,” Keith said, “but the magical deficit of our world creates choke points that significantly impact our operations. If you have any means to alleviate this, you will find us to be extremely generous.”

The Network contingent looked at Jason with anticipation, all but hanging off their seats as they awaited his response. He took a bite of his sandwich, paused to look at the sandwich appreciatively and then resumed thoroughly chewing it.

“Mr Asano...” Keith began as Jason swallowed, holding up a finger to indicate a pause as he slowly drained his glass of lemonade.

“Oh, that’s refreshing,” Jason said happily.

“Mr Asano...”

“Hold on a sec,” Jason said, retrieving the pitcher from the refrigerator and slowly pouring himself another glass. “Anyone else want a top up?”

“Please,” Asya said, eyes twinkling as she returned her glass to the bar. Annabeth flashed Keith a look of apology as she did the same.

“It’s really good,” she confessed.

“I can’t wave a magic wand and solve your problems,” Jason said as he finally emptied the pitcher. “Well, not all your problems.”

A wooden box appeared in his hands and he came around the bar to sit it on the table, where he slid off the lid.

“Two thousand iron rank spirit coins,” he said. “Category one, I guess.”

He took out a much smaller box and opened it as well.

“Two hundred category two.”

Next to the boxes he placed a pouch down with a clink. The crystal spirit coins had a different sound to ordinary metal coins. It was distinctive and almost ethereal, like fine wind chimes in a delicate breeze.

“Twenty category threes,” Jason catalogued. “Call it a goodwill gesture for the trouble I’ve caused. I think you know what is spurring my goodwill in this instance.”

“The other outworlder,” Annabeth said as Keith goggled at the boxes, running his fingers over the neatly stacked rows of coins.

“That’s very generous,” Asya said.

“I’m not a middle of the road bloke,” Jason said. “I like to think I make a good friend and a bad enemy. I’m otherwise best avoided, since I tend to cause trouble.”

“We’ve noticed,” Annabeth said.

“Now there’s your big problem,” Jason said. “Getting your people over the line into category four. I can’t help you with that. I daresay you have a better understanding of core-based advancement than I do.”

“That’s disappointing, I won’t lie,” Keith said.

“What I can do,” Jason said, “is help you to sidestep that problem entirely.”

## Chapter 304

### Terms

Jason looked over at Other Gordon.

“Are you sure that this guy should be hearing all this?” he asked.

“Participation in formal negotiations with outside parties is part of our agreement with the government,” Keith said.

“You know that when word about magic goes public, that’s where it’s coming from, right?” Jason asked.

“Oh, we know,” Keith said. “But that decision is settled, regardless of our personal viewpoints.”

“I resent the implication that...” Other Gordon started, only to trail off as a room full of hostile eyes turned on him. “The Prime Minister will hear about my treatment here!”

“And do what?” Jason asked. “Crap his pants in McDonalds again?”

“That’s an urban myth,” Other Gordon said.

“Sure it is,” Jason said, turning back to the others. “So, your real problem with the capabilities of your higher-rank members isn’t a matter of enough cores to break through to category four. My understanding is that monster core use is your primary means of advancement?”

“We call them magic cores, but yes,” Gladys said.

“I can tell from your auras that only some of you have been using cores. Just looking at the group of you, I’m assuming that essences are a privilege of rank. Anna and Asya, you are clearly sitting at baseline, with no advancement at all. Do you even have all your abilities awakened?”

“No,” Asya said. “And you’re right. Anna and I are executive level, while Keith is committee level. Nigel and Gladys are in the tactical and medical tracks respectively, which have their own standards, although Nigel is out of the ordinary.”

“I heard you had one guy doing things differently,” Jason said, looking at Nigel. “So, you’re him, yeah? What’s stopped you from sucking up cores? I’ve heard it’s been slow going.”

“It has,” Nigel admitted. “When I was first brought into the Network, I did all the research I could on magical combat. I found a number of references to non-core advancement in the oldest records, but it was like someone had gone through and excised them.”

“Nigel...” Keith said warningly.

“I’m sorry, Mr Culpeper,” Nigel said, “but I’m not letting this opportunity pass by, even if it is a controversial position. Mr Asano, I believe that core-based advancement was originally introduced as a method to control members through the magic core supply, only for that truth to be lost somewhere across the centuries and leave us with core-based advancement as the only path.”

“Well, I can’t speak to the history of your organisation beyond the broad guesses I’ve already made,” Jason said. “All I can do is to tell you is that there’s another way. It isn’t faster and it doesn’t make your abilities any more powerful, but the end results are individuals that are much more capable.”

Jason took a sip of lemonade before continuing.

“That man who attacked me, who you currently have in your possession. He’s silver rank. Category three. He should have had no problems handling me. Yes, he was trying to take me alive rather than take me out, which meant he couldn’t use a kill move with his opening attack, but he had me in one of the worst circumstances I could be in for a fight. He should have trounced me, but he didn’t.”

“You’re saying he was weak?” Nigel asked.

“Profoundly weak,” Jason said. “Same for his minions who tried to drag me off to France.”

“Where are those individuals?” Other Gordon asked.

“Last time I saw them they were heading up to Hanging Rock,” Jason said.

“Hanging Rock?” Other Gordon asked.

“I’m not offering a quick solution,” Jason said, ignoring Other Gordon. “I can’t really help your people who already use cores. What I am offering is a thorough solution. I can help you to bring up a new wave of people who are stronger than the last, using their powers to the fullest. I was taught using some of the best methodology for creating powerful essence users there is. I can’t train them as well as the people who trained me could, but I can still pass along the lessons I learned. I also have some tricks of my own that should prove useful.”

“You’re willing to train our people up to the standards of the other world?” Nigel asked.

“As best I can,” Jason said. “I’ll start with you, since you’ve been trying to reverse engineer the process yourself. I suspect that with some supplemental techniques, you’ll start leaping forward in advancement.”

“Can’t you just teach the people already using cores?” Annabeth asked.

“No,” Jason said. “Cores impede other forms of advancement. Once you go cores, you don’t go back, which is why professional adventurers on the other world don’t use them. They sell them or save them for their families so they can get the benefits of being essence users without putting themselves in danger. Basically, cores are what you give your Mum so she doesn’t have to fight monsters.”

“None of this changes the issue of not reaching category four,” Keith said. “You said you have a means to sidestep that problem.”

“If you have sufficiently capable people,” Jason said, “then you don’t need category fours. As I am right now, I could handle most silver-rank monsters alone. Category three, sorry. Don’t you find the number system less evocative and harder to remember? Sorry, I’m digressing. So, I can handle most category threes, and so long as it isn’t out on an open salt flat, I’d be willing to at least try any of them.”

“You’re that confident?” Nigel asked.

“I am,” Jason said. “That doesn’t hold true if you jump it up a rank, though. I don’t expect to do solo takedowns of category four monsters unless they happen to be very and specifically susceptible to my particular power set. A team of well-trained, silver-rank essence users should be able to handle almost any gold-rank monster, though. It’ll take probably more than half a decade to get there, but if I teach your people the foundational approach, then it should just be a matter of time before they get there themselves. I’m talking just about power use, here; I’m sure you have plenty of capable people to instruct them on combat skills.”

“That we have covered, yes,” Nigel said.

“So, that’s what I’m offering,” Jason said. “Everything you need to transform your roster of essence users over the next decade. There are other things, but they’re all secondary. I’m offering you the chance to transform the magical world.”

“You talk about big results,” Other Gordon said. “But you only promise them years in the future. This all sounds like a con.”

“You’re such a politician, Other Gordon. The Network doesn’t need a sound bite solution they can sell to people who aren’t paying that much attention. They need a fundamental change in the underlying infrastructure of how they operate. If they can’t see the value in that, I’m not the one losing out.”

Jason shook his head.

“Your friends here had me kidnapped, Other Gordon, so they don’t get to claim the moral high ground on this one. I’m not making any concessions for the purpose of proving that I’m on the level. You can accept it or not. If you can’t give me what I want, I’m happy

to walk away. I'm pretty sure I can get everything I need on my own, just with a little more effort."

"You won't find retrieving the other outworlder so easy without us getting them released," Annabeth said.

"You're right," Jason said. "But the hard way is kind of my thing. You haven't seen the list of who bet against me and lost, Anna. If I have to make a whole new list in this world, then so be it."

"Let's not go making any hasty decisions," Keith said. "You're saying you'll help us rebuild our entire tactical program if we get the other outworlder released?"

"No," Jason said. "Getting the other outworlder released is what brings me to the table. You don't get to ransom them to me."

"We don't have them," Keith said.

"The man responsible for kidnapping me is sheltering in your headquarters at this very moment. The person who kept him alive is in this room. You've got the same letterhead on the official stationary, so don't try selling me on their part of the Network not being your part of the Network. I had the crap kicked out of me, got collared and shoved into the boot of a car. You should be grateful that I'm not holding you responsible for that."

"We have wide-ranging concerns that go beyond just you," Annabeth said. "We can't just drop everything and work towards your agenda."

"I don't care about you, your problems or your perspective," Jason said. "This negotiation isn't about trading football cards. Your Network is holding a person against their will for no more crime than having something you want. The only reason I'm here to negotiate instead of in some shady rendition site is because the people you sent after me were pathetically weak."

Jason took a floral shirt from behind the bar and slipped it on, buttoning it up as he continued to talk.

"I know I come across as a light-hearted guy, with the lemonade and the sandwiches and the jokes."

Although his voice remained jovial, there was an undercurrent to it that tickled the hairs on the back of his guests' necks.

"I recognise that this may have led to the gravity of my concern on this matter being undercut. Allow me to rectify that. I am going to get that outworlder, whoever they are, out. That's just a fact. Maybe I die trying, but I've died before and it hasn't stopped me yet. If you help me, then we can put any unpleasantness behind us. If you won't, but you don't turn yourselves into obstacles, then okay. It's your organisation and I can't expect you to

go against your own team. But when I say gods help anyone who gets in my way, I'm being very specific. I know exactly what it means and that truly is what it's going to take."

As Jason talked, his aura ramped up until it was bearing down on the Network contingent like a weight. Only Gladys was able to truly hold up and even she was feeling pressured. The normal-ranked government official panicked and ran out the doors, sprinting around the outside deck towards the dock. The incongruent menace pouring off the barefoot man in a Hawaiian shirt and board shorts somehow made it all the more eerie.

The pressure receded, leaving the iron-rank Asya and Annabeth taking deep breaths, as if they'd just breached the surface of the water. Keith wasn't looking much better, while Gladys looked at Jason warily. Nigel was staring at him with wide eyes.

"Can you teach me to do that?" Nigel asked.

"To a degree," Jason said. "I can't replicate all the conditions that led to the current condition of my aura and you don't want me to. Some things aren't worth the price."

"And what is it that you want in return?" Gladys asked, taking over while the others were still recovering. "You haven't told us, yet."

"Nothing onerous," Jason said. "Mostly I want monsters."

"You want us to catch monsters alive?" Keith asked.

"No," Jason said. "I want dibs on killing any category three monsters in Australia. Further afield, if you can swing it. I want right of refusal on category twos as well."

"You want in on fighting the dimensional entities?" Nigel asked.

"Yes. I'm open to negotiation on dividing the loot, but I have no issue handing off most of the cores and spirit coins. I just need enough to meet my own needs. Aside from that, I have a few other requirements."

Gladys turned and looked at the wall.

"What is your shadow creature doing to Truffett?" she asked.

"He just mana drained him until he passed out," Jason said. "Can't have him causing trouble. He'll recover quickly on the houseboat."

"Asya, go check on him," Gladys said. "Upper deck."

"There's an elevator just through there," Jason said, pointing to the inner door. "Show her, please Shade."

"How many of those shadow creatures do you have?" Gladys asked as Asya followed Shade deeper into the houseboat.

"Just one."

"I sensed another one outside," Gladys said.

“Shade is an excellent multitasker.”

“What are your other requirements?” Keith asked, getting the negotiation back on topic.

“Small things,” Jason said. “I have some gold I’d like the Royal Mint to take off my hands without my getting audited or accused of arms smuggling.”

“Gold from the other world?” Annabeth asked.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“I don’t see that being a problem,” Keith said. “What else?”

“I’m going to get my family ready for when magic goes public,” Jason said. “The Network’s support isn’t strictly necessary, but it would be useful. You would also get to keep an eye on things, to head off any potential information breaches.”

“Again, not a deal-breaker,” Keith said. “It seems like what we need to hammer out are the specifics regarding your participation in our incursion response program.”

“How much are you allowed to decide now?” Jason asked.

“I’m empowered to make a preliminary agreement that I can put before the Steering Committee of our Branch and the International Committee. We aren’t looking to monopolise everything or we’ll just get more branches following Lyon’s lead.”

“You know that all this is predicated on the other outworlder,” Jason said. “I need to see some movement on that or we don’t have any kind of deal at all.”

“I can make that plain to the committees in question,” Keith said. “For now, I’d like to get some specific terms down that I can take back with me.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Let’s get down to it, then.”

As he and Keith moved to a table, Asya returned.

“How is he?” Gladys asked.

“Snoring,” Asya said. “Loudly.”

“You realise that he will be the one responsible for getting your gold organised,” Annabeth told Jason.

“What gold?” Asya asked.



## Chapter 305

### Section

Sitting at a table in the bar lounge of his houseboat, Jason spent considerable time hammering out details with Keith and Annabeth. For loot distribution, Jason would keep a percentage for his own needs and trade the rest for more ordinary remuneration, such as money or use of the Network's wide-ranging influence. Legally it would all go through his status as a security crisis contractor to one of the Network's front companies.

Other stipulations involved agreements on services and tertiary benefits Jason could access through the Network, as well as restriction on Jason's behaviour regarding secrecy.

"We'll need the family members you've informed already to agree to formal non-disclosure agreements," Keith said. "We'll do that through the government's existing classified information frameworks."

"I still have more people to tell," Jason said. "My brother, my sister-in-law and my mother."

"We don't love that you decided to tell so many people," Annabeth said. "We can live with it, though, so long as that's the end."

Eventually they came to a general accord.

"I'm comfortable taking what we have to the committees," Keith said, slipping the computer tablet he was taking notes on back into his briefcase. "Fair warning, though, Mr Asano: The committees are committees. They're going to want to change some details just to feel like they're in control."

"I think I've made my bottom line clear," Jason said. "If your committees want to make themselves feel like they're in control, I can probably accommodate a stipulation or two. If they want to make *me* feel that they're in control, you'll find me significantly less receptive."

"I'll do my best, Mr Asano," Keith said, standing up. "To be clear, my goal isn't to make them or you happy. It's to fulfil the Network's mandate of keeping people safe and maintaining secrecy."

"I can respect that," Jason said, standing to shake Keith's hand. As he did, Keith, Annabeth, Gladys and Nigel all received notifications on their phones, the same alarm-like sound for each. They glanced at each other as they took their phones out to check the messages.

"Is that notification of one of your incursion incidents?" Jason asked.

“It is,” Keith said. “We’ll have to skip the niceties and go, I’m afraid. Asya, I’ll have to leave Mr Truffett to you.”

“Of course,” Asya said.

“Can I tag along?” Jason asked. “I’d like to see one of these proto-astral spaces for myself.”

“I’m not sure that’s appropriate until we’ve finalised our arrangement, Mr Asano,” Keith said.

“Perhaps it’s fair if Mr Asano gets a look at what he’s agreeing to throw himself into,” Annabeth said.

“It might help if you can go to the committee with a sense of his true abilities,” Nigel added.

“Come on, Keith,” Jason said. “I’ll even give you all the loot. You want another big pile of spirit coins, right?”

“That’s certainly tempting, Mr Asano, but this wouldn’t be a sightseeing trip. It’s a category three incursion.”

“Oh, nice,” Jason said.

Keith turned to Annabeth.

“You are head of operations, Anna,” he said. “If you’re okay with it, I’ll defer to you.”

“Alright,” Annabeth said. “Don’t make me regret this, Asano.”

“Looks like the location isn’t too far,” Nigel said, looking at his phone. “Accessibility might be an issue and they’re sending a helicopter.”

“Where are we heading?” Jason asked.

“Dorrigo National Park.”

“Oh, nice,” Jason said. “I love it there.”

“You might like it less crawling with interdimensional monstrosities,” Keith said.

“Wow, you do not know me at all,” Jason said. “If we’re going to chopper out, I’ll go grab your car.”

“What do you mean, grab my car?”

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“I’ve never encountered a proto-astral space before,” Jason said. He was speaking through the headphones they were each wearing as their helicopter flew over mountains. “I’ve read about them, but that’s no substitute. What can I expect to walk into?”

“Incursion spaces can take a number of forms,” Nigel said. “Most common is some variant of the space it’s connected to, although those variants can be very extreme. The magic is usually very thick, although occasionally it’s very barren. Kind of like your town.”

“It wasn’t quite the same feeling,” Gladys said, “although the results were much of a muchness. Did I sense the solar panels of your houseboat sucking up all the magic?”

“Yep,” Jason said.

“When an astral space has low-magic conditions like that,” Nigel said, “the real challenge is environmental. We need to use spirit coins to keep our personal magic levels stable. In those cases, the ADE is usually the only monster that spawns, which is a blessing.”

“What did ADE stand for again?” Jason asked. “After dinner something?”

“Anchor Dimensional Entity,” Annabeth said. “If you’re going to join in our operations, Mr Asano, you’ll need to act with some professionalism.”

“When you see me get down to business, Anna, you may find you prefer this side of me. Nigel, what about the proto-spaces that aren’t magical deserts.”

“Then we tend to have the opposite problem,” Nigel said, “and the incursion space is swarming with DE activity.”

“Which is definitely preferred,” Keith said. “The higher the magic, the more bountiful the harvest. Inert magical materials, essences, awakening stones. We have specialist harvest teams that work alongside the tactical teams to make the most of every incursion.”

“It may seem like we’re profiting off the danger to our world,” Annabeth said, “but those resources are critical to protecting it.”

“I believe you,” Jason said. “I know what it takes to fight monsters and Earth is a magical wasteland.”

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There were already multiple military helicopters on site when they arrived, descending into a valley. There was no single open space large enough for all of them, so multiple clearings were being used. It was a full scale military operation, one of the ‘terrorist readiness exercises’ that Jason had heard about.

Nigel and Gladys hurried ahead along a bushland trail toward the main area of operations. Anna, Keith and Jason made their way at a more measured pace.

“We’ve been working with a special military unit formed for exactly this purpose,” Annabeth explained. “We provide the military with category one enhanced firearms. The military’s primary role is to protect the harvest teams until the ADE is neutralised, at which point our tactical teams will cooperate in maximising harvest yields and any necessary mop up.”

“Are you going in?” Jason asked.

“No,” Annabeth said.

“We don’t have the training,” Keith explained. “We’d just get in the way of the people who know what they’re doing.”

“My job is administration and logistics,” Annabeth said. “As Operations Director, my job is to get the right people to the right place with the right resources and let them do their thing.”

As they drew closer to the centre of operations, the ambient magic grew stronger.

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- You have entered the vicinity of a proto-astral aperture. The ambient magical saturation has increased. Your recovery rates will remain at normal levels without spirit coin consumption.
- 

They arrived at a bustling military camp Jason was startled to realise was only about an hour old.

“These military guys sure set up fast.”

“They’ve had a good amount of practise.”

“So they all get magic guns?”

“All the ones who go in,” Anna said. “It’s why spirit coins are important. That’s what we make magical ammunition from.”

As they reached the edge of the camp they were approached by a pair of armed military personnel. Jason could sense the low-level magic in their sidearms.

“Mrs Tilden,” one of the soldiers greeted with rigid politeness. “Is this Mr Asano?”

“It is,” she said.

“Come with me, please. Mr Asano, please follow Private Cowell.”

The private led Jason through the camp to where Nigel was gearing up outside a tent while barking directives at a mixed group of people in military camo and paramilitary black. Nigel’s own gear was black; fatigues under magical tactical armour. Unlike the soldiers, he carried no firearms, just a magical, thigh-mounted knife.

Nigel’s gear was very basic magic. Humphrey’s power to conjure weapons for his summons produced items very much of the same kind. Even basic, though, they were still bronze-rank items and would do the job for which they were intended.

The private deposited Jason nearby as Nigel dismissed the squad leaders and marched off with Jason in tow. They arrived at a group dressed in the same black tactical gear as Nigel, although most were holding guns. Jason could sense they were all bronze-rank essence users and, except for Nigel, core users.

“You’ll be with my section for protection,” Nigel told Jason.

“What am I protecting you from, exactly?” Jason asked, which drew a chuckle from Nigel’s section.

“Mr Culpeper’s directive was to keep you safe,” Nigel said. “That’s what I intend to do.”

“No offence, Mr Thornberry,” Jason said, “but I’m safer alone.”

“It’s Thornton, not Thornberry,” Nigel said.

“Who am I thinking of?” Jason wondered aloud. “Sorry, I’ll just stick with Nigel.”

“We carry out tactical operation in nine-man sections,” Nigel explained.

“Hey,” the solitary female member complained.

“Sorry, Darce,” Nigel said. “We operate in an eight-man, one Darcy section, broken into three groups by broad power type. We’ve got heavies, who have the powers to give and take the big hits. That’s Darce, Jonno and Higgy.”

“Higgy?” Jason asked. Higgy was a good-looking man of Indian descent.

“H.I.G.,” Nigel explained. “Handsome Indian Guy.”

“I’m not Indian, Thorny,” Higgy complained. “I’m from bloody Woolloongabba.”

“Then we’ve got our scouts,” Nigel continued, “who are what it says on the tin. They have powers that make them fast and – if they can keep their damn mouths shut – quiet.”

“That’s one of my things as well,” Jason said.

“One of?” Nigel asked.

“I have a lot of things,” Jason said.

“We prefer to get really good at one,” Nigel said. “Our scouts are Orange, Green and Woolzy.”

“Because I’m from Woolloongabba,” Woolzy said.

“Which is bullcrap,” Higgy said. “Why couldn’t I be Woolzy?”

“Me and Higgy were recruited together,” Woolzy confided. “He got the looks and I got the talent.”

“Talent for riding my coattails,” Higgy muttered.

“That’s enough out of you two,” Nigel said.

“Why Orange and Green?” Jason asked.

“Well,” Nigel said, “they have the same last name and one of them is from the town of Orange, so we call him Orange.”

“Are you from a town called Green?” Jason asked Green.

“Nope,” Green said, without further explanation.

“Do you have the same first name?” Jason asked them.

“Nah,” Orange said. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Okay then,” Jason said.

“Saving the best for last,” Nigel said, “due to me being one of them, is the hitter group. We’re the sweet, meaty chunks of this stew and we’re all about that damage.”

“Meaning they aren’t worth a damn without the rest of us,” Orange said.

“The other hitters are Cobbo and Digit,” Nigel introduced. “I recommend against asking about Digit’s moniker.”

“Suffice to say,” Digit said, “that there are certain services one might procure from a lady of negotiable chastity for which it behoves one to check the quality of said lady’s cuticle care.”

“Meaning don’t let a prozzy stick a finger up...” Orange said before Nigel cut him off with a sharp glare.

“I’m sure he gets the idea, Orange. Now, this time around, our goal is to introduce Mr Asano here to exactly what it is we do and bring him back very not dead. Mr Asano, we can get you suited up if you like, although I imagine you have your own gear.”

“I do,” Jason said as dark mist appeared to engulf him. A few seconds later it passed to reveal Jason in his combat robes and cloak. He pushed the hood back off of his head.

“That’s a neat trick,” Higgy said. “Ever tried it in a phone booth?”

“Oh, I totally should,” Jason said. “If I can find one.”

“Are you that bloke from the news?” Woolzy asked.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“What’d a bunch of bikers come after you for?” Orange asked.

“It was a huge bloody balls up,” Jason said. “I was hanging about with my mate Vermillion, who’s a vampire, but I don’t hold that against him. Some other prick vampire didn’t like it, so he sent some bikers to mess me up. Problem is, this other vampire’s thick in the head and doesn’t realise a very obvious problem. If you take a bunch of bikers addicted to vampire blood, cut off their supply and then tell them you’ll turn it back on if they do a thing, they get *really* worked up about doing that thing. The inevitable happens, the bikers go nuts and suddenly they’re firing guns from the back of motorcycles in the middle of the highway when every sod and his mum are out driving to bloody brunch. Now, I’ve got my uncle in the car and I’m not going to let a bunch of bikies shoot him full of holes, so I step out. Suddenly I’m all over the telly.”

Nigel was quietly observing as Jason’s mannerisms shifted more in line with those of his section, along with some subtle changes in his aura that brought it more into line with theirs.

“Is that the guy who runs Club Vermillion you’re talking about?” Woolzy asked. “I always wanted to check that out, but it’s a Cabal club. Normies and Cabal only.”

“I get in,” Higgy said.

“That’d be bloody right,” Woolzy complained.

“Is that a magic sword?” Jonno asked, looking at the hilt poking out from under Jason’s cloak.

“Yep,” Jason said. “A mate made it for me.”

“Nice,” Jonno said. “They won’t give us anything bigger than a knife.”

“Jonno,” Darce said, “you conjure an M61 Vulcan. That’s a Gatling gun from a jet fighter, yet you won’t shut up about getting a bigger knife.”

“Sometimes you don’t need a rotary cannon,” Jonno complained. “Sometimes you need a big knife. A sword would be even better.”

“Do you know how to use a sword?” Jason asked.

“Could you teach me?” Jonno asked.

“Don’t answer that,” Nigel said.

“Hey, Asano,” Orange said. “How come you sound like an Aussie but look like a Jap?”

“I dunno, Orange,” Jason said. “How come you sound like an arsehole but look like... actually, that checks out.”

The section all laughed.

“Yeah, fair enough,” Orange grumbled.

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The Network’s paramilitary nine-person sections were assembled, along with their actual military counterparts. The organisational structure seemed quite similar, with the Network appearing to have adapted much of theirs from the military. The sections formed by military personnel were based on weapons rather than essence abilities, with the heavies, scouts and hitter groups of the Network sections replaced with gunner, scout and rifle groups respectively.

“Once the boffins get the aperture opened up,” Nigel explained, “SOP is to secure a beachhead on the other side and assess local conditions. Once we have a stable landing point, we go hunting the ADE while the harvest sections get to work. Lucky for us, the ADE radiates a nice, detectable signal. That means we can go after it and the harvest teams stay out of its way. Green is our signals man, and he’s going to lead us right to it, aren’t you, Green?”

“Yep.”

“Asano, you need to do as I say, when I say it, no complaints,” Nigel said. “Your job is to do what you’re told and not die.”

“I won’t lie,” Jason said. “Those are both things I’ve struggled with in the past. Since I’m a self-invited guest, though, I’ll do my best.”



## Chapter 306

### Core Users

As a Network team set up a ritual to open the aperture to the proto-astral space, Nigel talked Jason through the assembled force. The Network's tactical presence consisted of two platoons of three nine-person sections. Four of the six boasted silver-rank tactical division members, while a specialist medic section also had Gladys.

"Those five make up the entire category three contingent of the Sydney branch," Nigel explained. "The network does not hold back with category three incursions."

Jason hadn't known how many silver rankers the Sydney branch had, as Shade had only spotted Gladys during their time in Sydney. The tactical personnel either spent their time at another facility or practised better informational security than the healer.

"So you're the only section with no category three?" Jason asked.

"Thorny's the only category two the Ditto trusts to run his own section," Digit said.

"Ditto?" Jason asked.

"DTO," Nigel explained. "Director of Tactical Operations, Koen Waters. He's the strongest of our category threes. That's him there, giving orders."

Nigel pointed out the four people radiating silver-rank auras. One of the men was an Indigenous Australian issuing instructions to the other three.

"Once we go through the aperture, he's the man on the ground with the final say on all operational decisions," Nigel said. "Master under God, as it were. Sections are expected to operate independently, though, since all the magic in dimensional spaces tends to fuzz-out comms. It's not like they don't work at all, but they have a habit of being unreliable, especially when a lot of powers are being thrown around."

"Actually," Jason said, "I might be able to help, there."

"Help how?" Nigel asked.

"I have a power that can serve as a communication system. I got a bump in the numbers it can affect when I hit bronze, but I never had the people to make the most of it."

"What's the range?" Nigel asked.

"About a half-dozen clicks, under normal conditions," Jason said. "With this much magic, at least a dozen, maybe fourteen."

"Clicks," Orange said. "Look at you with the military lingo."

"Yeah, because I've seen a war movie any time in the last thirty years," Jason said. "I guess you do seem like someone who doesn't get closer to movies than running a dog fighting ring in an old Blockbuster store."

“That’s enough,” Nigel scolded as the team cracked up laughing. “Give me a rundown of this ability.”

Jason explained his party interface’s voice chat function to Nigel, who then took him to do the same for the DTO.

“It can do a sixty-person raid group, with each member able to access two discrete channels,” Jason explained. “Each of up to six ten-person parties gets their own, plus another one that’s group wide. That won’t let us include the military, but it should just cover your Network contingent.”

Jason invited Koen and Nigel to a group. The two men were startled as they encountered his interface but Jason quickly demonstrated the functionality.

“This is in line with powers I’ve seen from some international branches,” Koen said. “We’ve never had access to it before, which makes you my new favourite person, Asano. Comms is the second biggest operating concern we have.”

“What’s the biggest?” Jason asked.

“Where to take a dump in active combat,” Koen said. “That being a non-factor for essence users does more to ease our operations than any power in our roster.”

Koen called back the other section leaders so that the tactical sections would be expecting it when Jason sent out raid group invites. Gladys was very different from Jason’s previous experiences. The air of flirtatiousness was replaced with one of cool professionalism. Jason warned Koen that going through the aperture would most likely break the link, but Koen wanted to do it anyway. Getting the people used to the power before they went through would save trouble when it was reapplied on the other side.

Jason returned to Nigel’s section while Nigel remained with Koen, discussing revised operating procedures given access to reliable communication.

“So, you have video game powers?” Digit asked Jason. He was Nigel’s second in command of their section. Nigel’s official rank was section leader, while Digit was section second. That was equivalent to a corporal and lance-corporal, respectively.

“Something like that,” Jason said, glancing over at Koen and Nigel. “Why does Nigel get his own section when he’s only a category two?”

“They were in the army together,” Digit said. “When Koen was bumped from Chief Training Officer up to Director of Tactical Operations, he recruited Nigel to replace him. Most of us actually grew up in Network families and got our essences without any kind of combat experience. We have people from the families who’ve been trained, of course, but we like to pull in more contemporary soldiers like Koen and Thorny to keep us current.”

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The aperture to the proto-astral space wasn't visible to the naked eye, although magical senses made it extremely easy to see. It was a more tenuous bridge across dimensional boundaries than a normal aperture, appearing to Jason's senses as if it might collapse at any moment.

It couldn't be traversed in its natural state and a team of network ritualists worked to stabilise and open the aperture. It was a similar process to opening up the archway into the astral space the Order of the Reaper had occupied, with the aperture at the centre of a large magical diagram. Mana lamps were unnecessary, as the aperture itself provided all the magic needed.

Jason watched with interest as the ritual was carried out, after which the aperture took the form of a normal, open astral space aperture. Jason went through with the rest of Nigel's section.

- 
- You have entered a zone of extreme magical saturation. Magical manifestations will occur at an increased rate.
- 

They arrived in a lush jungle, the air heavy with magic and humidity both. Through the canopy he glimpsed a large tower made from crude brickwork. The bricks were little more than crudely shaped rock held together with roughly slathered-on mortar.

"We see a lot of repeat scenarios," Nigel explained to Jason. "Usually the geography is similar, thus we're still in a valley. Jungle could be better, but could be worse. Good news: Probably no weird magic to impact our items and abilities. Bad news: This jungle will be crawling with venomous monsters. All kinds of serpents, primates with poisonous wrist barbs, giant bugs, big cats. Those are the least likely to have poison, but don't rule it out."

As Nigel went through his explanation, he led his people and Jason away from the aperture to allow more people to pour through. Nigel's section took up a perimeter position alongside the other Network tactical sections as the military teams moved in; first the combat soldiers and then the logistics people, alongside the Network's own auxiliaries.

"That tower in the distance," Nigel pointed out, "means we're dealing with giants, based on the scale and construction methods. A lot of the category two roamers we see will probably be troll and ogre variants. Jungle giants are smaller than most variants, around three metres tall. They're faster than the typical giant; not what you'd call agile, but they'll surprise you if you aren't careful. Expect some exotic abilities like poison breath and camouflage. Trust your aura and magic senses over your eyes."

"Good to know," Jason said. "You know, poison and giants are right in my sweet spot."

"I'll have to take your word for it," Nigel said. "Your job is to observe, not to fight."

"Will do," Jason conceded. "There'll be other chances."

"The category three anchor entity will most likely also be some kind of giant," Nigel said.

"ADEs, plural," Green corrected him. While the others were watching the jungle around them, he was occupied with a computer tablet in his hands. The tablet had magic engraving carved directly into the back, looking like an odd combination of magical diagram and simplified circuit board.

Each Network section had what they called a signaller which, in Nigel's team, was the laconic Green. The signaller had two primary tasks. One was to maintain communications gear, which was notoriously unreliable around heavy magic, while the other was to track the anchor entities that were the ultimate goal of the operation.

"I'm tracking three ADE readings," Green said. "That might be three big ones or three clusters, moving in groups."

"My guess would be small groups of stronger trolls or ogres," Nigel said. "That's a good thing. Multiple ADEs means we have to track them all down but they'll be individually weaker. When we're dealing with category threes, we like them as weak as we can get. Increased numbers we can live with since, as you can see, we have numbers of our own. We throw almost everything we have at category three incursions."

"What do you keep in reserve for other incursions if they happen?" Jason asked.

"We have four reserve sections on standby," Nigel said. "They'll be able to handle anything below a category three incursion if one pops up."

A ground base was assembled in startlingly little time, this time Jason getting to watch as Network members who could manipulate earth or even directly reshape it into simple buildings went to work. Koen did multiple comm checks with Jason's power while this was going on and once the military took over for the Network teams maintaining the perimeter, Koen sent the sections out into the jungle. Before being sent out, each section was supplied with poison resist and antivenom potions.

"I'm good," Jason said when they were offered to him. "Poison works like a recovery potion on me."

Nigel's team all turned to him.

"What?" he asked. "I told you that poison's kind of my thing."

"Is anything not your kind of thing?" Darce asked.

"Store-bought mayonnaise," Jason said. "Make it yourself or don't use it. Oh, and canned beans."

“I like canned beans,” Cobbo said. It was the first time Jason had heard the flat-faced, taciturn man speak.

“I’ll make you some proper baked beans,” Jason promised. “It’ll change your life.”

“Make double-sure to keep Asano safe,” Koen said over voice chat as the Network teams started making their way into the jungle. “He’s not just a VIP observer, now; he’s our communication’s hub.”

Nigel’s team was not assigned to pursue any of the ADE targets. That was left to the four groups with silver-rankers, while Gladys’ team acted as a roving support unit. Nigel’s team was tasked with sweeping an extended perimeter of the camp, reducing the number of bronze-rank threats the military needed to deal with. The iron-rank bullets in the military’s guns would hurt a bronze-rank monster but they would blow through an expensive stockpile of ammo for each one they dropped.

Nigel’s team carried bronze-rank carbine weapons, although most had them slung away. Nigel and Jonno both conjured their own guns, which would consume their mana for ammunition instead of expensive, bronze-rank bullets. Higgy carried a conjured shield and no weapon at all.

“I don’t love being called Higgy,” he confided in Jason as he conjured his shield, “but at least they didn’t go with Captain America.”

Darce, Digit and Cobbo also had conjured weapons; a whip, bow and spear, respectively. Only the scout team of Orange, Green and Woolzy kept their guns in hand.

Darce had preternatural control over her segmented iron whip, which she quickly demonstrated as they made their way through the jungle. Lesser monsters started coming out of the jungle every few minutes, their fearless, berserker rage completely at odds with their lack of threat. The others left them to Darce and her dancing whip, which struck them down out of their air.

Jason was astounded at the sheer number of monsters in the proto-astral space, trumping not just the other world but even the magically-saturated astral space in which he had spent months in constant battle. He had wondered how they managed to collect enough cores to field such a large force of bronze-rankers, but that quickly became clear. Jason’s ability to loot extended to the entire raid group, to the delight of Koen. He did have to revise procedures on the fly again as loot rained down on anyone who touched a kill.

Jason was reduced to a magic wi-fi hotspot as he withheld from joining the fights, even against powerful bronze-rank monsters like a hydra and a hulking bog ogre. His only active contribution was to drain poison from the team to save on their consumables.

The section's teamwork was something Jason paid significant attention to as they took down monster after monster. His own team had refined their teamwork to the point of excellence, but in a very different way to the Network operatives.

Jason's team was a collection of individuals who learned to dynamically reconfigure their approaches to build varying synergies that maximised their potential in any given circumstance. It was an approach that made the most of each individual's full suite of abilities, which both promoted versatility and helped advance those abilities to higher ranks.

The Network section's teamwork had clear origins in military tactics, with the group forming a lean, effective unit able to act in perfect unison. Their coordination was all about coming down on any threat like a hammer, taking it out before it had any chance to respond. Each member only used a handful of powers, but each one was a force multiplier to the team's effectiveness.

The scouts rarely used their guns with the expensive ammunition, instead baiting monsters into overlapping fields of fire from the other team members and their conjured weapons, throwing in some effects to hinder and control. Orange, as it turned out, was an affliction specialist like Jason. His abilities were more about inflicting debuffs than damage, though, setting enemies up for the team.

The team was highly offence-oriented, with three Onslaught confluence essences amongst them. Jason knew that was a favourite amongst humans in the other world, due to its synergy with the human aptitude for special attacks.

Watching the team of core users work together, Jason started to realise that they were making the most of their nature as core users. He knew from his own training, where he had many discussions with Rufus, that core users often focused on subsets of their essence abilities. Without the need to use every essence ability in order to advance them, they could ignore whole sections of their power set.

Rufus had always framed this as a universal bad, as they were wasting elements of their kit and leaving potential synergies on the table. Watching the military-style tactics of the team, though, Jason recognised that his own team would never be able to fight in that manner if they wanted to advance their abilities. The core users could ignore this restriction to develop an incredibly focused approach.

It was not something Jason would ever go for himself, since it would be hampering his own advancement, but he couldn't help but admit that it was effective. Jason had been expecting a bunch of second-rate core users, but was forced to acknowledge that they had made the most of their advantages.

Jason also suspected that the uniformity of their approach would make it much easier to swap personnel between teams. The more individualistic nature of an adventurer team made it hard to accommodate new or temporary members, and losing a member could be crippling. The Network, he imagined, would find this much less of a problem.

One thing that stood out was Nigel. Jason had originally thought it was the lack of proper training techniques alone that was slowing Nigel down, but it became clear that fighting like a core user was also impeding his progress. Nigel would need to fight more like an adventurer and less like a soldier if he was going to start advancing his abilities more quickly.

While he came to admire the tactics of the core-users, he also spotted a critical weakness. If that weakness came into play on this expedition, he knew he might not remain an observer after all.

## Chapter 307

### What You Call Observing

Jason saw flashes of what Nigel's team could bring to the table if they fought more like adventurers. While the general approach was for focus fire tactics, they each had specialties that were pulled out against various creatures.

The scouts rarely used their firearms full of expensive ammunition, instead using their powers to support the team in combat when they weren't actually ranging ahead in search of threats. Jason was surprised to find that two of them were affliction specialists. Green was a wide-area type, using various word-of-power abilities to impede enemies.

Orange was more focused on singular targets, like Jason. His evil-eye power set did little damage, though, instead setting his team up to enhance their focus-fire strategies by making enemies more susceptible to damage and impeding defensive abilities.

The last scout, Woolzy, was a fast-moving melee striker with the Swift, Foot and Knife essences combining to form the Master confluence. Of all the team, he was the most adventurer-like in his tactics, using bursts of staccato movement to set up assassination-style special attacks. He would only conjure his twin knives right before striking, leaving them buried in the victim.

Woolzy's role was to beat fast and agile monsters at their own game before they used their mobility to outmanoeuvre the team. He guarded their flanks, leaving them free to rapidly focus-fire through the primary enemies.

His speed was very different from Sophie's flowing, uncatchable grace. While Jason knew that Sophie would envy Woolzy's powerful attacks, Jason much preferred her ability set. He did admit to himself, though, that he possibly had his own case of burst damage envy.

Other members had their own times to shine. The shield-wielding Higgy would also erupt into bursts of speed, but to intercept attacks, rather than deliver them. Like Woolzy, his job was to let the team do their job unfettered, intervening to absorb the attacks into his shield. Every hit seemed to charge it up, as every so often he would unleash an overwhelming counterattack in the form of a conical wave of force.

Darce had the most exotic power of the team, summoning a brass steam golem to give them more frontline presence. Her summon had a number of differences from observations Jason had made of other summons. The steam golem was cheaper to summon, mana wise, but had a limited power supply. That supply was rapidly consumed, and all the faster if the golem used its special attacks like firing scalding steam.



The golem's weak longevity was paired with a much shorter cooldown, though, of half an hour compared to the usual six, and Darce didn't need a summoning circle to call it out. All this, plus the need to give it more direction than a normal summon, led Jason to believe it wasn't an actual summon. He suspected it was an ability he had heard of but never seen before, known as a puppet power. Rather than summoning an independent creature, it created a very sophisticated conjured object.

The meat and potatoes of Nigel's section was the hitter team consisting of Cobbo, Digit and Nigel himself. Cobbo used conjured spears, mostly throwing them with almost bullet-like speed. He would occasionally make devastating charging attacks or conjure a pike when monsters charged the team in turn.

Digit used a conjured bow, making flashy special attacks, while Nigel was quite conventional with his conjured rifle. With his black paramilitary gear and assault weapon, he would fit right into an autocratic dictator's extrajudicial death squad.

Nigel showed more of his capabilities when the team was attacked on all sides by a wave of small and weak, but multitudinous monsters. His rifle vanished as he tossed it aside and conjured a pistol in each hand. He moved forward slowly while continuously turning around, pistols blazing in every direction as he shot the leaping stoat monsters right out of the air.

Nigel wasn't looking to aim, firing to either side and even backwards, yet every shot landed on target. Bullets even whizzed past his own team on their path to dropping one monster after another. Jason continued to not participate in that encounter, although he did call up Gordon who used pinpoint beams to strike down any of the diminutive monsters that drew too close.

Jonno also used a conjured assault rifle for most tasks, and likewise had other gun forms available at need. Unlike Nigel's pistol configuration, Jonno's other weapon was a rotary barrelled machine gun, which he slung from his hip like it was an eighties action movie.

"Bit of a mana hog," Jonno explained, "so I only pull it out for the big stuff."

That gun was to be outshone when the group encountered a trio of silver-rank jungle trolls, half the height again of a human. Jonno conjured up a third gun, so large that even hip-slung it seemed like he should be toppling over. The rotary machine gun was already an image of excess, while this was a full-blown rotary cannon.

Jonno didn't fire immediately, instead letting his team go to work. Darce called up her golem, which launched into one of the trolls but was quickly being overpowered. Higgy used his charged shield to send one stumbling back while Nigel conjured a grenade

launcher to blast the third. A grenade to the face rang the troll's bell, but was far from a kill shot and they could visibly see it start to heal.

The purpose of their stalling tactics was to give Orange time to cast a curse spell three times over, chanting the same words for each.

*"Let the scales of power sway."*

"They all landed," he said, clearly surprised that none of the spells were resisted. He didn't know that Jason's aura had already lowered the resistances of the trolls. "You're good to go."

The barrels on Jonno's ridiculous weapon spun up with a whir before erupting with thunder as a terrifying storm of bullets started chewing into the trolls. Jason realised that Orange's curse must have temporarily negated the damage reduction from rank disparity.

The silver-rank monsters weren't especially tough examples of their rank, but they still had silver-rank physical fortitude. This was the only reason they weren't instantly turned to chum by the ludicrous weapon, Jonno's endless stream of bullets was cutting through them like a saw through a tree.

Jonno's mana was depleting at an absurd rate. Before that moment, Jason didn't realise someone could blow through mana so fast he could pick it up with his magical senses. From the look of Jonno, it was doing a similar job with his stamina.

Jason grabbed a silver-rank recovery potion he had taken from the archbishop of Purity and held it up to Jonno's mouth.

"Drink," he ordered.

Even the over-ranked potion bought Jonno only seconds more uptime with his crazy gun, but seconds were critical as the trolls finally collapsed under the barrage. Jonno's gun vanished and he collapsed right after, Jason helping him stay upright. As Jason pulled a camp chair from his inventory for Jonno to rest, the remainder of the team swarmed the trolls, pouring flasks of liquid over them that started combusting shortly after exposure to air.

"You have to torch them," Nigel explained as they watched the trolls burn. "Otherwise you can kill them and they'll still heal up."

"D&D rules," Jason said. "Burn the trolls."

Jason recognised that Jonno's huge gun filled the same role as Farrah's lava cannon: a showstopping power that devoured mana like pigs with a fresh corpse.

"We need to make sure the bodies are properly burned up or they won't stay dead," Nigel reiterated. "Jungle trolls are one of the physically weakest varieties but their recovery strength is incredible. Fire, fortunately, shuts down the regeneration of just about anything

you can get to burn. This bronze-rank everburn oil can be made fairly cheaply, so we all carry it for regenerators.”

Jason suspected that the alchemists of Earth were on the same path as Jory of making the most of lesser ingredients. His magic senses were sharp enough to differentiate Jory’s bargain potions from the good stuff and he got a similar feeling from most of the alchemical items he had seen in the Network’s possession.

“Are you alright, Jonno?” Jason asked. “You look like you’ve run a marathon.”

“I’ll be right,” he said. “Thanks for that potion.”

“No worries,” Jason said. “Don’t go taking another one any time soon, though. That was a category three recovery potion.”

“Yeah, I can feel it,” Jonno said. “Good thing mana recovers so much faster here.”

“You should see Mr Asano’s houseboat,” Nigel said. “It has the same mana recovery effect.”

“Seriously?” Jonno asked. “How do I get one of those?”

“Go to an alternate reality and then enter a contest to go to a pocket dimension where you compete against the most skilled young essence users in the world to pass a series of trials laid down centuries earlier by an ancient order of assassins that worship the lord of the afterlife,” Jason said.

“No one’s selling them online?” Jonno asked.

“I haven’t checked,” Jason said with a laugh. “Maybe one of those companies that makes custom super yachts can help you out. In the meantime, wait until that potion is out of your system and then eat this.”

Jason handed over a bronze spirit coin, which Jonno held up to examine.

“Is that you?” he asked.

“Yep,” Jason said. Jonno turned the coin over and read the text embossed onto the back.

PRODUCT OF JASON.

G’DAY MATE.

“You are a weird bloke,” Jonno told Jason. “And that’s coming from a guy who just killed a bunch of trolls with his magic airplane gun.”

Nigel checked in on Green, who was the team signaller. As the signaller, it was Green’s job to pay attention to the ADE tracking, even when hunting it wasn’t their job. He did so with a computer tablet that seemed to merge magic and technology, something Jason was fascinated to explore later.

“Those category threes weren’t one of the ADE groups were they?” Nigel asked.

“No, Boss.” Green said. “All three ADE signals are well clear of us. These were definitely ordinary roamers.”

Nigel bowed his head unhappily.

“Problem?” Jason asked.

“Only the ADE should be at the category cap for the incursion space,” Digit explained. “We’re seeing more and more roamers breaking that rule, though. Word is that it’s a sign that we’re going to start to see category four incursions. They had one in the UK a couple of years ago.”

“That kind of speculation is above our pay grade,” Nigel said firmly.

“All due respect, boss,” Cobbo said, “but since we’re the ones standing at the front, we’re the first people who get to speculate. If that’s above our pay grade then they’re free to pay us more.”

The rest of the section, on the lookout for more monsters, nodded.

“We have more immediate concerns,” Nigel said, opening up the voice channel to Koen. “Koen, we just ran into some category three jungle troll roamers. The ADE will probably be something with more grunt.”

After reporting in, the section was back on the move.

“Those category three monsters mean that the anchor monsters will be stronger?” Jason asked.

“That’s been the experience so far,” Nigel said. “We won’t be dealing with category fours, but it’ll be from the more dangerous end of category three. It might not be so bad individually, seeing as there’s more than one ADE, but the rules went out the window once a category three roamer showed up. Mr Asano, I’d advise you let us escort you back to the camp.”

“I’d rather stay,” Jason said. “It sounds like you might have need of me.”

Nigel let out a reluctant sigh.

“Mr Asano, I don’t doubt you’re a capable combatant. I’ve seen the footage of you fighting the category three from France. But I have orders and you don’t have the coordination with our units. I don’t doubt you can tear up some monsters, but I am not going to lose people because you wandered into their field of fire and they held back.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “I’ll stay out of the fray, but I’m not going back to camp.”

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While the silver-ranker led teams continued to track the anchor monsters, Nigel’s section became more aggressive in their sweep of the extended perimeter, bringing their patrol range closer the camp. If a category three reached the camp, iron-rank bullets were

not going to stop it. There were bronze-rankers amongst the Network's harvest teams who were trained enough that they could step up if needed, but probably not without casualties.

Given the situation, Koen had ordered the harvest teams back to camp.

"Nigel," Jason said. "There's another category three 900 metres in that direction," he said, pointing. "It looks like it's approaching one of the harvest teams as they're pulling back."

"And how do you know that?" Nigel asked.

"It's possible I have some friends looking around," Jason said innocently.

Nigel frowned but ignored Jason's behaviour for the moment to stay focused on the priority of keeping the harvest teams safe.

"How reliable is your information?"

"100%" Jason said.

"Alright. Section, move out, double time. Don't think we won't be having a conversation about this later, Mr Asano."

As the team moved rapidly through the jungle, they saw a distress flare rise up into the sky.

"Looks like the DE found them," Nigel said, glancing at Jason to find that he wasn't there. "Bloody hell, Asano."

"Sorry," Jason said over party chat. "I thought it was more important to move fast and I didn't think asking you would facilitate that."

The team came across a clearing where a toad the size and shape of a Volkswagen Beetle was belching out poison gas. It was adding to an already huge cloud of sickly green that filled the clearing and was now spreading further into the jungle.

Although it was silver-rank, it was far less dangerous than even an individual troll, at least to the team. The monster's only true threat was its breath, which failed to penetrate a shimmering screen manifested by Higgy. Orange again stripped the rank-disparity damage reduction and an onslaught of special attacks made relatively short work of it. Just as they were wondering how to find Asano and the harvest team in the lingering miasma, a big black ute came rolling out of the greenish cloud. It had no driver but stricken harvest team members were piled into the tray with Jason standing over them, holding out his hands.

*"Feed me your sins."*

With the incantation, the red glow of life force emerged from a member of the harvest team, tainted with green murk. The stain was extracted, rising up to be absorbed into Jason's waiting hand.

While that was still being completed, Jason chanted the incantation again and a second person started to be cleaned alongside the first. Then a shadow hand emerged from Jason's torso for a third simultaneous cleanse, followed by another. As the fourth began, the first finished and Jason moved on to another harvest team member with his first hand.

With four going at once, the nine-person harvest team was cleansed of the silver-rank poison before it was able to finish them off. Many of them were a lot worse for wear, however, only being iron-rank. If Jason hadn't prioritised their cleansing over the bronze-rankers, then it would not have gone as well.

Jason hopped down off the ute as it pulled to a stop in front of the team. As several of the team started checking on the poison victims and feeding them potions, Nigel marched up to Jason.

"Mr Asano, I thought we had an understanding. Is this what you call observing?"

"I observed that these people were going to die," Jason said. "If we'd had this conversation before instead of after those people would be corpses, not survivors."

"Better to ask forgiveness than permission?" Nigel said. "We have standing operating procedures for a reason, Mr Asano. A silver-rank monster isn't something you cavalierly take on."

"No, Nigel. It's something *you* don't cavalierly take on. If I couldn't take on monsters like that alone, I'd have died a dozen times over. Look, I'll admit that I wasn't expecting much from your Network teams and you've really turned me around. Your tactics are perfect for sweeping through monster infestations this thick."

Nigel opened his mouth to speak but Jason fired off a harmless but startling burst of aura to silence him.

"While I have been impressed with your methods, I've already seen the problem and you should know what I'm about to say. Your teams are great at mopping up the trash, but this strategy won't hold up against the really powerful stuff. If a monster is tough enough to withstand your hammer-blow tactics – and it's a big hammer, I'll grant you – then you're going to get hit back hard. Am I wrong?"

"We've taken out four category threes just today," Nigel said.

"I saw," Jason said. "And I saw what it took to get there. You're going to need people who can take on trolls solo, even at category two."

"You're saying you could have taken one of those trolls by yourself?" Nigel challenged.

“I could have taken all three by myself,” Jason said. “That’s not bragging; it’s just the kind of level you get to when you master all of your powers. I’m not saying every bronze-ranker – category two – should be able to take out every category three. I have powers to shut down regenerating creatures, but throw me up against a silver-rank rock monster and then I only have a chance because I have an arsenal of weapons and tools that the Network just can’t compete with.”

“We can’t match up to your gear,” Nigel said. “But we have training and discipline.”

“You were at that meeting on my houseboat,” Jason said. “Your existing methods are reaching their limits as the monsters keep growing stronger. What happens when the category three monsters aren’t on the weaker end of the spectrum?”

“We adapt our tactics,” Nigel said.

“Look, the Network has kept a lid on all this for centuries, which is incredibly impressive,” Jason acknowledged. “I thought I’d need to rebuild your whole tactical division from the ground up,” Jason said. “That was naïve, dismissive and insulting, for which I apologise. Even if I had my team here, we couldn’t mow through monsters with the efficiency that yours does. What you need is a supplemental program. A smaller cadre of people who don’t fight like soldiers. Not regular soldiers, anyway.”

“You’re talking about a special forces unit,” Nigel said.

“Sure,” Jason said. “A special forces unit with training and tactics built around hitting fewer but stronger targets. Powerful monsters require adaptable strategies that leverage every advantage from every team member. That’s how adventurers fight and I’ll help you get there because you’re going to need it. Even if the monsters are getting stronger, the solution to your problem isn’t category four personnel. In fact, I’ve heard that would be a bad idea. The Cabal’s category fours can’t survive on Earth without going into hibernation because the magic is too low-grade. I have to imagine that essence users would fare just as badly, if not worse.”

“You think that specially trained category threes are a viable alternative?” Nigel asked.

“Yes. Right now, your team can take on a category three at category two. You need a team that can take on a category four at category three, which is a whole different scale.”

“We don’t have whole teams of category threes.”

“We can work on that too,” Jason said. “My big concern was not having enough monsters to go around, but that’s clearly not an issue.”

Woolzy walked over from where he had been checking on the harvest team.

“Boss, they’re going to pull through but they’re not in much of a state to move. Either we need the healer support team or we move them on Jason’s...”

He looked around and then at Jason.

“Where did that ute go?” Woolzy asked. “That’s pretty short-lived for a conjured vehicle.”



## Chapter 308

### Not the Monster

“Here’s the situation,” Koen said through voice chat. “The ADEs are river hydras. Big ones. Lots of regeneration, lots of poison, lots of heads. We’ve got two that are ideally placed. Far enough apart that we can take them on separately but close enough that we can take out one and intercept the other before it gets near the camp. The other one is more of a problem. It lies on the other side of the camp and seems to be moving in that direction.”

“What’s the approach?” one of the silver-ranked section leaders asked.

“We’re going to need both platoons to hammer our way through all that regeneration, even with fire powers to slow it down,” Koen said. “All sections will meet up at the designated rendezvous point. The camp will need to fend for itself against whatever else comes its way and I’ve already issued orders for the camp to withdraw from the incursion space.”

“What about the other ADE?” Nigel asked.

“We have two options on that,” Koen said. “Option one is we carve off some of our forces to stall it, buying time for the camp to fully extract. I do not like this option, since it diminishes our strength and distances the second group from the healers. Both of those factors will increase the chance of casualties, given that these things spew clouds of category three poison gas. I don’t want to lose anyone today”

“What’s option two?” Another of the section leaders asked.

There was a pause, as if Koen was reluctant to say.

“It’s probably a worse choice,” Koen said finally. “Asano, how strong are you? No flexing, no bullcrap. Honest assessment. How good are you really?”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Nigel said.

“Asano,” Koen said, “you took on a category three essence user alone.”

“He lost,” Nigel said.

“Do you think you’re strong enough to stall out the other ADE?” Koen asked.

“Koen,” Nigel said, “you can’t be serious.”

“By which you mean Director of Tactical Operations Koen, right Nigel?” Koen asked.

“We may not be in the military anymore but there is a chain of command that I will use to beat the English out of you if you interrupt me one more time. Mr Asano, can you do it or not?”

“Director Koen,” Nigel said, his anger held back behind clipped, disciplined speech. “Sir. Mr Culpeper directly and personally ordered me to keep Asano safe and you want to send him into danger.”

“I have complete operational authority for a reason, Section Leader Thornton, because sometimes the man on the ground has to make the call. My current options are to balance casualties in our own forces against casualties in the withdrawing camp against one man that isn’t one of mine.”

“Does the man in question get a say?” Jason asked, having let the two men argue amongst themselves.

“Go ahead, Mr Asano, although let me be clear that Nigel isn’t wrong. I am looking to put you at risk in order to keep my own people safe.”

“I appreciate the candour,” Jason said. “I came here to see what the Network is capable of and I am impressed. I’ve also seen the weaknesses, though. I know how to help you and now is the time to show you what that means.”

“I don’t want you getting yourself killed in an attempt to raise your value in our eyes,” Koen said. “Unless you’re genuinely confident of surviving, I don’t want you anywhere near that thing.”

“This is the point I’m trying to make,” Jason said. “You need to see that we view these circumstances very differently. This situation might seem exceptional to you, with all these category three monsters running about, but I have a word for days like today.”

“And what’s that?” Koen asked.

“Tuesday.”

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Against Nigel’s protests, Koen sent Jason after the third hydra. At Koen’s insistence, Jason went to the rapidly evacuating camp on the way, to pick up an observer. She was a scout from one of the harvest teams and apparently excelled at stealth.

Kylie Chen was bronze rank. While she did have abilities and training that could be turned to combat, she was not a primary combatant. Her skills and abilities were best suited to quietly scouting out potential opportunities for the harvest teams. Her kit included strong perceptual abilities that allowed her to find plants, minerals and other materials with magical properties.

She had a dark essence, like Jason, and could hide herself even from silver rank monsters. Although he had been reluctant to bring her along, Jason was less grudging after his own senses couldn’t pick her up until she was almost close enough to touch. The silver-rank assassin from France had not accomplished better.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Jason asked her. Around them was a storm of activity as the support teams were evacuating the camp back through the aperture.

“I might not be much help in a fight,” Kylie said, “but I’m confident in not being caught.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Let’s go.”

They left the camp on foot, Jason getting out of sight before having Shade emerge. He didn’t want the commotion of his familiar taking a monstrous form and disrupting the evacuation. Darkness exploded out of Jason’s shadow, coalescing into a pair of mantis beetles. It was a form Jason was experienced at riding from his time in another astral space jungle.

“I hope we mix up the environment next time,” Jason muttered to himself as he used his cloak to lightly jump into the saddle. He was surprised at the lack of trepidation from Kylie as she curiously climbed onto the dark carapace of the other beetle and settled herself.

The beetles scurried into jungle too thick for more conventional vehicles, moving swiftly through difficult overgrowth. Sweeping blade-arms opened up otherwise inaccessible pathways. Gordon floated next to Jason, keeping up with the swift beetle by transforming into his nebula state to make rapid dashes. He used his force beams to dispatch any low-rank monsters fast enough to keep up with the beetles or dashed right through them to the same effect.

Twice along the way they stopped for Jason to deal with bronze-rank monsters. One was a mud elemental that fell to Jason’s sword, while the other was a pack of simian-shaped lizards. They were loaded up with afflictions and quickly handled.

“It’s up ahead,” Kylie announced, showing off the perceptual powers of a scout. Soon after they heard the sound of something large and heavy forcing its way through the jungle. Kylie pulled out a hand camera from a small belt bag.

“Stay well clear and keep hidden,” Jason said. “I don’t want to be running off to rescue you when you catch a dose of poison breath, no matter how heroic it would make me look. Well, maybe if you can set me up with good backlighting.”

“You seem very relaxed for someone about to fight what sounds suspiciously like a kaiju,” Kylie said.

“I’m a man’s man,” Jason said. “The only thing I fear is a frank discussion about my feelings.”

Jason warned Kylie to get ready and dropped lightly to the ground as the beetles turned into clouds of darkness that returned to Jason's shadow. Kylie stumbled, but was prepared for the drop and managed to remain upright.

"Don't put yourself in danger trying to get good footage," Jason warned, the jokiness now absent from his voice. Without waiting for a reply, he started walking into the jungle.

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Kylie wasn't getting great footage. She had some impressive shots of reptilian heads larger than she was snaking through the jungle, but little else. Between the dense jungle and the obscuring clouds of poison gas, visibility was poor.

Knowing she would need another approach, she reached into a small bag at her belt and took out a headband stitched with magical symbols and slipped it on. A cable dangled from the headband and she plugged it into the camera, which she returned to the belt bag. The camera was now recording her perceptions directly.

Her senses were much more capable of seeing what was happening than the camera itself. The racial gift she obtained when awakening her Vision confluence essence gave her the unusual capability of awakening a perception power from each essence, where other essence users only had the one. There was a lot of overlap, with so many powers enhancing her magical and aura senses, but the effects grew with each one to be far more powerful than her rank suggested.

This allowed her to gain a real sense of just how powerful Asano's aura was. Auras had a quality to them that was separate from their strength, that clearly indicated an essence user's rank. Asano's aura bore the unmistakable feel of category two, while easily reaching category three in strength.

All auras with a power, she had discovered, had a flavour to them that reflected their magical effects. Asano's was no exception. His aura had an overwhelming feel of domineering judgement, as if Asano himself was the arbiter of objective right and wrong. It was the most arrogant aura she had ever encountered and she felt it react to her senses, which flinched from it like fingers from a hot stove.

Kylie's superior senses had helped her to hone the control of her own aura, which was a key part of her formidable stealth abilities. Compared to Asano she was a second-rater and he was the first person whose emotions she was completely unable to read. Even category three agents allowed her to snatch glimpses of what was happening behind their eyes, but Asano's aura felt like a solid wall around something mysterious, dark and dangerous.

Like most of the Network members in the incursion space, she had no idea who this strange essence user was that the higher-ups seemed to consider so important. He wandered around like he was in charge, with his strange robes and eerie cloak. Rumour was that he was from another branch that Sydney either had or was trying to recruit. She hadn't really cared until she encountered his bizarre aura and sensed the incredible magic of the equipment he wore.

The items weren't just powerful but incredibly well refined. It made it hard for anyone with lesser senses to even realise how potent the magic on them was. The man was a walking treasure trove and she wasn't sure that anyone but her realised.

She returned her concentration to the fight, which she was tracking through her senses, eyes closed. She could sense the bulk of the dimensional entity's main body and its necks that were incredibly long and flexible. The seven heads crashed through the jungle trying to chase down Asano, who repeatedly vanished from one spot to appear in another. As for the hydra's poison breath, Asano was not just ignoring it but absorbing it, and transforming it into some kind of health and mana recovery effect.

Asano was lashing out at the creature repeatedly with a weapon in each hand. One was a dagger and the other was a strange whip that, ironically, took the form of a hydra. Both weapons easily landed against the monster's bulk. She could also sense some kind of swarm creature crawling all over the hydra. She sensed echoes of Asano's aura from it, meaning it was likely a familiar and not just a summon.

Summons and familiars were both rare. Very few people had the knowledge to perform the rituals involved, which seemed to influence which essence users could awaken such powers. Asano, strangely, had three; the swarm, the shadow that could turn into beetle mounts and the nebula monster that guarded them on their journey through the jungle. It was another reason to be curious about the odd man.

Asano's weapons seemed to have little effect on the hydra, although they certainly agitated it, sending it thrashing through the jungle in pursuit of Asano. He dodged the creature well but there were seven heads snaking through the trees in pursuit. He took a few hits as he dodged a toothy mouth but a giant head crashed into him sending him flying like he'd been hit by a truck. He seemed to have some kind of shield that, with each hit, transformed into a healing effect.

After one such hit, one of the heads clamped down on his leg, huge teeth sinking into it and it lifted Asano up through the canopy and into the air. Asano's nebula familiar launched all four of the orbs floating around it at the creature, which collided in pairs to trigger two explosions with potent magical force. The hydra dropped Asano, who did not

fall but slowly drifted. She could sense that it was the magic of his cloak holding him aloft as he chanted a spell.

She felt the life force drained out of the hydra. It flowed out of the monster and into Asano, completely restoring his leg. He then dropped out of the air and back through the canopy.

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The hydra's body was lumbering and Jason easily sprayed Colin all over it. The heads, by contrast, were as quick as the body was slow, with Jason taking multiple hits in the course of locking in his afflictions. The creature was powerful enough that even with the shields his amulet was creating with each affliction, the monster punched through those shields in short order.

The hit that breached the armour left him dizzy and the monster clamped onto his leg, rearing its head to haul him up and over the treetops. If not for Gordon's orb explosions freeing him, the leg would have been torn right off.

Jason's Feast of Blood power didn't actually drain blood but life force to heal him and, as of bronze-rank, grew stronger for each instance of poison on the target. Since both Colin and Jason himself had left the hydra riddled with poison, one casting was enough to completely heal him.

Things became easier over time as another of Jason's bronze-rank powers came into play. Rigor Mortis was an unholy affliction left behind when Jason made attacks using the shadow arms of his Hand of the Reaper ability. Rigor Mortis inflicted a stacking penalty to the speed and recovery attributes. It was only a small penalty, but as the afflictions built up, the hydra became easier to dodge and slower to chew through the afflictions already impeding its regeneration.

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Gradually, Kylie came to sense that something was profoundly wrong with the hydra. It was slowing down and becoming sluggish, giving Asano an easier time of avoiding it. Further, there was some kind of malediction taking over its body with increasing speed. It wasn't recovering the way it should and the magic afflicting it kept growing and growing.

What was, at first, a small collection of minor effects had escalated into a magical force that rivalled anything she had ever sensed. It was a cancer, chewing at the hydra from the inside like a carnivorous tumour. Then Asano cast a spell that she felt resonate with the afflictions. Each one enhanced the spell's power only a little, but there were so many that the spell ravaged the hydra to the point that she was amazed it clung to life.

At this point, the fight was effectively over. The hydra struggled to move its sluggish heads in pursuit of Asano, but could barely move. She was expecting Asano to back off, but he was not done. To her shock, he cast a spell that drained all the horrifying afflictions from the hydra.

Startlingly, Asano devoured all that terrible power, feeding on the misery and suffering of what had once been an enemy, but could now only be described as a victim. Even so, he was still not done. In the wake of the darkness drained from the hydra, Asano had left something in its place. A power, bright and terrible, appeared inside the hydra. It was unlike anything she had ever sensed, a force that felt like it could burn a hole in the universe.

A calm had come over the jungle as the hydra lay prostrate and unmoving. Her incredible hearing heard Asano's voice in the eerie stillness, alien to his warm, joking tone from earlier. It was as cold, dark and merciless as the bottom of the ocean.

*"Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death."*

She felt something rupture the very dimensional fabric of the incursion space, right above the hydra. Power, like that now inside the hydra but far stronger, came from the dimensional rent, smashing into the hydra like the fist of god, sending a blinding glow shining up through the jungle canopy.

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When Jason returned to Kylie, he found her huddled against a tree, wide-eyed and shaking with fear.

"It's fine," he told her. "The monster's gone."

He moved forward to help her to her feet but she scuttled away from him like an insect.

"Oh," he said, realisation dawning. "It's not the monster you're afraid of."

## Chapter 309

### Letting Him Run Rampant

In the Network's Sydney branch offices, several people were sat around a conference table while an image displayed on a screen. Keith, Annabeth, Gladys, Koen and Nigel were all in attendance, as was Eustace Brown, the grizzled director of the Harvest Division, and Asya, the International Committee representative. The recording made by Kylie Chen was garbled nonsense to anyone without the ability to sense magic, as the true recording was of her magical perceptions. The display was simply the magitech medium used to present it.

"What exactly was that?" Keith asked as the recording came to an end. The recording was deeply immersive, allowing them to experience the recorder's perceptions and, to a limited degree, their emotions.

"It was proof that we need to get Asano on side," Koen said. "Not because of his personal power but because he can teach his training methods. Two years ago he was selling staples and making occasional appearances on a cooking show. Now he's one of the most powerful essence users on the planet. It took two platoons to take out one of those hydras and we only avoided casualties because we have a top-flight healer. He did the same thing alone and under-ranked. If he can teach our people to do that, and without cores, our monster escalation problems are over."

"Can we expect our people to reach that standard, though?" Annabeth asked.

"No," Gladys said. "Not unless they have the right power set."

"That's true," Koen said. "If we examine what we just experienced, it becomes clear that Asano's maledictions start weak but grow exponentially more powerful until they rival what even the most powerful category three is capable of. I've seen this type of specialist before, although never to this extreme."

"What about that power at the end, with the glowing light?" Keith asked. "Do we know what that was?"

"It's an extremely rare damage type," Gladys said. "It ignores all forms of protection and resistance. The only other essence user I've seen use it was in the US. He was a proper religious type. 'Essences are god's test to see who is worthy of the power,' that kind of thing."

"Because that never ends badly," Annabeth muttered.

"That guy called it god fire," Gladys said. "As for whether a god actually gave it to him, who knows?"



“We’ve yet to confirm the existence of any deific beings,” Keith said, “so I don’t think that’s a productive line of discussion.”

“I agree that we need to reach an accord with Asano,” said Eustace, head of the Harvest Division. “Rope him in, whatever it takes. That haul was like nothing we’ve ever seen. Even putting aside the incredible materials, we looted what are now some of the best magic items in our arsenal. Two category three guns with poison effects that use mana instead of bullets for ammunition. From testing, they aren’t as mana efficient as conjured firearms, but even so it’s a game changer. There was also some category three leather armour that not only protects against poison but heals the wearer and repairs itself. Plus, a very rare, healing and recovery focused essence.”

“Asano didn’t take any of the harvest,” Koen said. “I offered, after what he did with the hydra, but he said a deal’s a deal. The leather armour and the essence came from the hydra he killed, plus a category three core and more than a thousand spirit coins. He even said that he was tempted to just filch the essence for himself. It’s not like we’d know, because he loots right into a storage space.”

“The man is a like a hydra himself,” Eustace said, “except instead of heads he has ridiculous utility powers. Did we confirm he has a portal ability yet? Allowing anyone connected with his communication ability to loot a dimensional entity is basically gold raining from heaven. The only challenge is figuring out how to collect it all when the tactical teams are leaving a trail of treasure like Hansel & Gretel came from a Saudi oil family. This guy is what I’d wish for if I found a genie in a bottle.”

“That communication ability is also incredible,” Koen said. “I’d put Asano on the response team of every incursion space if I could.”

“I disagree,” Nigel said. “Yes, Asano brings a lot to the table. And I like the guy. I’d have a beer with him any day, but I don’t want him watching my back.”

“Explain,” Keith said.

“He’s unreliable. He acts without warning, only follows directions as long as he doesn’t think he knows better, and he’s the type to always think he knows better. He’s powerful, but I’ll take someone I can trust standing behind me over someone who’ll be amazing if he doesn’t wander off first.”

“I will acknowledge he would be better employed to operate independently,” Koen said. “Nigel, even if you don’t want to fight with him, would you be willing to train with him? You’re head of the training program and don’t use cores. That puts you in the best position to pick up and pass on his methods.”

“That, I can do,” Nigel said. “When my people aren’t on the line, I’ll work with him, no worries. It’ll let me offset any problematic attitudes he tries to introduce to our people about discipline and following orders. But if you put him in the field, I don’t want him attached to my section. Trying to incorporate him into a chain of command would be futile. He’s too arrogant.”

“He never much cared for authority,” Asya said, speaking for the first time in the meeting. “He always liked to question and provoke.”

The recording had shaken Asya quite badly. The man she met on the houseboat was a natural progression from the boy she had known. The sexy, impish grin and intelligent eyes full of insolence and promise. Treating conversations like prize fights, constantly streaming nonsense to throw off the opposition.

The man in the recording was something else entirely. The malevolent power and the grand destructive force that followed. The chilling voice chanting a sinister incantation to mercilessly finish a monster already on the precipice of death. The incongruity with the Jason Asano she knew left her unnerved.

“It seems like the French were onto something, trying to snatch up Asano,” Keith said. “Clearly, though, active cooperation is more valuable than forced capitulation. I think I’m just about ready to recommend we do whatever it takes to get a deal.”

“We should,” Eustace said. “Someone told me that Asya made a joke about giving him Bora Bora. If that’s in any way possible, I say we do it. Just one incursion with a looting power and it’s clear how China and America have become so dominant, poaching everyone with a loot power from other countries. I’m not sure there can be a price that isn’t worth paying, given the riches we can expect to reap. We need to lock this down before the US and China come sniffing around.”

“As the IC representative,” Asya said, “I can’t advocate tying this up in factional politics. It’s only right for your branch to claim some benefits, but if you try and keep the pie to yourselves, you’ll get cut when others come to take their own slice.”

“I don’t think Asano will want to give the Lyon branch as much as a crumb,” Annabeth said. “After what they did, the only reason he’s open to collaboration is that he wants us to deliver the other outworlder.”

“Asano made it clear that he wants access to dimensional entities,” Keith said. “Presumably, that’s tied to his advancement methodology, which we’ll learn for ourselves soon enough. He needs us to access the dimensional spaces.”

“I think that’s less of a certainty than you’re suggesting,” Gladys said. “He’s given me a peek at his magical knowledge. Now that he knows about the grid and we’ve shown him

how to access apertures, he may have everything he needs to access incursion spaces himself.”

“Tapping into the grid?” Keith asked. “Is that even possible?”

“The grid is designed to be accessible to anyone with the requisite knowledge,” Asya said. “Given that he’s been to a place that makes our magic look like bronze age technology, it seems likely that he could.”

Keith let out a sigh.

“My largest concern,” he said, “is oversight. Our only leverage in enforcing any agreement is the ability to take what we provide away. If that isn’t a real threat, what reason does he have to abide to our agreement?”

“I’ve had analysts poring over his whole life for a week,” Annabeth said. “Our profile suggests that loyalty is a core value for him. Their analysis is that if we play it straight with him, he will hold up his end.”

“For how long?” Keith asked. “What happens when we deliver the other outworlder? What happens if we can’t?”

“We’re increasing pressure on the Lyon branch,” Asya said. “They can’t just kidnap anyone they want something from.”

“Tell that to Miranda Ellis,” Annabeth said darkly.

“There’s a reason she was moved out of the Melbourne branch,” Keith said, “but now isn’t the time to revisit old grudges. After seeing Asano in action, I think I can get the Steering Committee to move forward on making a final agreement with him. What about the International Committee?”

“My recommendation will be to go along with that,” Asya said. “I’m just a representative, though. The actual decision will be made above my head.”

“You should realise that we’re playing with fire, here,” Nigel warned. “I think, after watching this recording, we all realise that Asano is dangerous. Do we really want him running around unchecked?”

“The agreement is what keeps him in check,” Keith said. “What’s your alternative? Some kind of enforcement?”

“If we went down that road – which I strongly recommend against,” Koen said, “then we need to avoid the mistakes of the Lyon branch. From a tactical perspective, we hit him hard and fast, with overwhelming force. I’m talking all of our category threes, including Gladys. He can build up to endanger a category three but he’s vulnerable in the early stages of a fight. We don’t give him a chance to ramp up to the power level he showed

against the Lyon branch operative and the Hydra. And I'm not talking about capture. We put him all the way down and make sure he stays there."

"Agreed on both counts," Annabeth said. "We shouldn't do this, but if we do, we do it thoroughly. Our analysis is that he'll play it straight if we do, but if we turn on him and he's not dead, he will hurt us. Really hurt us."

"You think he'll go after our families?" Keith said.

"No," Annabeth said. "I think his threats to my wife were just a message not to go after his own family. He knows the way to really hurt us is by going after our secrets. He's threatened as much in the past. Once he's curing children's cancer on television, we can't touch him, while he can blow us wide open. Or he goes to the Cabal. Maybe the EOA. You think they won't welcome him with open arms?"

"Imagine if he really can access the grid and dimensional spaces," Gladys said. "What wouldn't the EOA give him in return for that? They'd want him more than Eustace and his obvious man crush."

"Hey, if it gets him on board," Eustace said, "I'll take one for the team."

"Well," Gladys said. "Maybe not quite as much as Eustace."

"Surely there's a middle ground between war and letting him run rampant," Nigel said.

"Not from his perspective," Annabeth said. "What did we ever do other than threaten his sister and try to kidnap him? What reason does he have to answer to us?"

"When I was in school," Asya said, "I was in debate club with Jason. He was always better at winning over audiences than judges, because his arguments sounded logical but were really about passion. You could feel him believing things so hard that you started to believe them too. We were debating democracy versus authoritarianism, and the way he talked about the difference between obedience and loyalty..."

She stood up.

"As far as I'm concerned," she said, "this discussion is over. If we act in good faith, I believe that he will too. If you go the other way, don't tell me, because I will warn him. I'm heading back to Canberra to make my report to the IC in person."

The others watched as she marched out of the conference room.

"So," Gladys said, turning to Anna. "You took my advice and went with the honey trap."

"I did no such thing!"

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Paul Abreo was part of the Steering Committee for the Lyon branch of the Network. He had wanted to talk to the Operations Director, Adrien Barbou, in person, but the man

was spending all his time working out of the black site. With the International Committee ramping up scrutiny, Paul didn't want to risk the site's location being exposed by a visit and instead called Adrien on the secure line.

"Adrien, it's time to bring this to an end."

"I'm close," Adrien said. "She's ready to break. I can feel it."

"Close isn't good enough, Adrien. The IC is coming down on us hard."

"Once she breaks, we can share what we get out of her and they'll shut their mouths."

"The Sydney branch is cutting a deal with their outworlder," Paul said. "It's already showing results. They're not going to back down when they're getting voluntarily what we can only potentially get through rendition."

"You have to keep them off my back long enough to finish this," Adrien said. "You think this outworlder will give us anything after what we've done? If he has the support of the International Committee, he'll probably leverage what he can offer to sanction us. All we can get, we'll have to get from her, or the other branches will leave us behind."

"You think I don't know that, Adrien? The simple fact is, we took a risky shot and we missed. At this stage, cooperating with the IC will get us more than resisting them will. It's time to hand the girl over."

"Give me a week," Adrien said. "If I can't do it in a week, I'll hand her over."

"The Steering Committee has made their decision, Adrien."

"One week."

Paul grumbled through the phone.

"Three days," he said. "That's as much as I can give you. More than that and the Steering Committee will send people in to remove you from your position."

"Thank you, Paul. You won't regret this."

"See that I don't. You owe me for this one, Adrien."

In his office, underground with concrete walls, Adrien hung up the phone. His fury showed only through his stillness as his mind ticked over. He unlocked the bottom drawer of his large oak desk and took out a steel lockbox with magic engravings that would destroy the contents if anyone forced the lock.

He took the box to the elevator. There were no buttons, only a locked panel that he opened with a key. Behind the panel was a card reader, through which he swiped his identification, a hand scanner that he pressed his palm to and a voice scanner, into which he spoke his name. A light turned green and the elevator doors closed, the lift ascending up to the surface.

The elevator emerged on the grounds of an abandoned water plant that looked to have been left unattended in the countryside for decades. He wandered through a hole in the chain link fence, beyond the range of the hidden cameras. He then opened the lock box, took out a satellite phone and an envelope containing a number, which he dialed.

“Ms Ellis,” he said, when the line was picked up. “This is Adrien Barbou. I’d like to talk about your proposal.”

## Chapter 310

### Old Testament Power

Erika stormed upstairs and threw open the door to her daughter's bedroom. Standing in front of a monitor, Jason and Emi were holding plastic guitars and playing a rhythm game. Taika was sitting on the floor behind a plastic drum kit. All three turned to guiltily face the door.

"Jason," Erika scolded. "We have thirty family members in the back yard and you're in here?"

"Those may not be unrelated facts," Jason said.

"Well, nanna just arrived, so get your arse downstairs."

Emi and Jason immediately perked up, putting aside the guitars.

"I'll head back to the houseboat," Taika said.

"You can stay if you like, Taika," Erika said. "I didn't see you arrive."

"I left a portal open in your bedroom," Jason told her.

"What?"

Erika marched to her own bedroom and opened the door to find a shadowy archway at the end of her bed.

"Seriously?" she asked, turning her glare on Jason.

"No one's going to come in here," Jason said.

"Excuse I," Taika said as he brushed past and paused in front of the portal. "We're heading into Sydney tomorrow, yeah, Jason?"

"Yep," Jason said.

"No worries," Taika said. "You have a lovely home, Mrs Asano."

Taika disappeared through the portal.

"Come on, Emi," Jason said. "Let's go see Grandnanna."

Arriving downstairs and going through the kitchen, Jason was intercepted by one of his cousins. Koji was the son of Ken's brother, Shiro. Being Jason's age, they had spent a lot of time together as children, without ever really being friends.

"So here he is, back from the dead," Koji said. "I guess there's no keeping Bananaman down."

"Koji," Jason said, "You do realise that you're implying that I'm too invested in white culture by referencing a British cartoon series from the 1980s that you and I used to watch together, right?"

"I see dying didn't make you any less of a smart arse," Koji said.

“No, that’s pretty set in stone,” Jason said. “Still, I won’t begrudge you going the other way.”

“What?” Koji asked.

“He’s calling you a dumb arse, Uncle Koji,” Emi explained.

“Oh Jesus,” Koji said. “You’re going to turn out just like him, aren’t you?”

“You hear that?” Jason asked Emi. “Uncle Koji thinks you’re going to be super good-looking. Let’s go find Nanna.”

“I hate you so much,” Koji said. “I’m glad you’re not dead, though.”

“Love you too, cousin.”

They went out into the back yard where a huge family barbecue was in full swing. He nervously met with his grandmother, who was lucid and happy to be so. She had almost no memory of the last several years and was happily catching up with all her family. Things got a little awkward, given that she didn’t remember that Amy was no longer with Jason but Kaito.

Jason found himself answering the same questions over and over. His story started with the one he had originally given his sister, but as his frustration grew, the story started to morph.

“I got one of the men who killed my wife, but the other one clubbed me over the head,” he explained to one of his cousins. “Now I can’t form short term memories so I have to keep meticulous records as I put the pieces together in my quest for revenge.”

“Isn’t that the plot of the film Memento?”

“Never heard of it,” Jason said, then gave a knowing look. “Or maybe I have and don’t remember.”

Jason spotted Erika scowling at him from across the yard and he ducked out of sight, finally grateful for the crowded yard. Emi continued to trail along behind him.

“Uncle Jason?”

“Yeah?”

“What were you busy doing, yesterday.”

“Fighting monsters.”

“Really?”

“Yep.”

“What are monsters like?”

“Scary.”

“Do you have any recordings of them?”

“I don’t think your mother wants you seeing them. Neither do I, for that matter.”



“What if I can talk dad into letting me?”

“No dice, Moppet. Convince your Mum and maybe we can talk.”

Emi’s face took on a pout.

“Where did you find monsters?” she asked.

“That’s not my secret to tell,” Jason said. “I’m hoping you’ll learn that soon, though.”

Jason was somewhat uncomfortable, the attention of everyone present prickling his aura senses. One particular strand was focused on him like a laser beam and he looked over at his mother.

“Emi,” he said. “You go see if you can’t convince your Mum now. I should go talk to mine.”

He made his way up to Cheryl, whose hands were clasped together around an untouched glass of wine.

“G’day, Mum,” he said softly. “I was kind of a prick the other night. Of course, you were kind of a prick for most of the twenty-tens, but maybe we can start treading some fresh ground. How about we find somewhere quiet inside and I tell you about what I’ve been up to.”

Cheryl flashed a well-recognised look of dissatisfaction at Jason’s poke, but visibly calmed herself.

“I’d like that,” she said.

“We can use Erika’s room,” Jason said. “There’s something there you need to see.”

Soon after, a startled Cheryl emerged through the portal onto the houseboat. As she leaned against the wall trying not to vomit, Kaito’s voice drifted in from the media room.

“What the hell is that? Is that a lion man?”

“It looks like Ron Perlman from Beauty and the Beast,” Amy’s voice came after.

“From the movie? That can’t have been Ron Perlman.”

“Not the movie, Kai. The TV show. The old one, not the new one.”

“There’s more than one?”

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Jason, Hiro, Taika and Vermillion met the EOA contingent in the downstairs bar of Hiro’s establishment. It was closed and empty, pending the change in ownership. The EOA representative was Michael Kissling, who had once come for Jason in Vermillion’s café.

“You’re not going to try and drag me off again, are you?” Jason asked.

“It’s come to our attention that the attempt would be unlikely to go well,” Kissling said wryly.

Jason had no expertise in the field of managing criminal or legitimate enterprises, so he hung back with Taika as Hiro and Vermillion went over documents and signed contracts.

“So, you fought a bunch of monsters, right?” Taika asked.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“Isn’t that scary?”

“Terrifying,” Jason said. “The trick is to start with the little ones and work your way up.”

“How little?”

“You know that rabbit from Holy Grail?”

“Bro, that thing’s savage.”

Jason’s phone rang with a number he didn’t recognise but he answered it anyway.

“Johnson Deli, where we give you the big sausage,” Jason answered, getting an odd look from Taika.

“Sorry, I think I got a wrong... wait, Jason?”

“G’day Asya. How’d you be?”

“This is how you answer your phone?”

“No, you really did use the wrong number. I’m actually doing temp work in a deli. Crazy coincidence, right?”

“You’re a lunatic, you know that?” she laughed. “Look, I’m on my way back to Sydney from the International Committee office in Canberra and we’ve gotten some movement from the Lyon branch about the outworlder. Can you meet me to talk in person? I can drive up to Casselton Beach once I’ve been to the branch office in Sydney.”

“Actually, I’m in Sydney myself,” Jason said.

“Great! Can you meet me at the Sydney branch in, say, three hours?”

“I’m not quite ready to walk into the lion’s den yet,” Jason said.

“You realise that if we’re going to work together, there has to be at least a level of trust,” Asya said.

“Tell me that there wasn’t a discussion about killing me off to forestall trouble and I’ll take you up on that.”

“Neutral ground, then,” Asya said. “You set the place.”

“Yarranabbe Park.”

“Alright. I’ll see you in three hours.”

Jason wandered back just as Vermillion and Hiro settled up. Hiro was looking like the cat that got the cream, while Kissling was throwing uncertain glances in Jason’s direction.

“We’re happy?” Jason asked.

“Very,” Hiro said. “Their lawyers didn’t try to sneak anything through.”

“You’re not out of practice?” Jason asked. “You haven’t practised law in a long time.”

“Are you kidding?” Hiro asked. “I got more out of my law degree as a morally questionable business developer than I ever did at my old firm. Besides, it’s plain they went out of their way to make it clean and unambiguous.”

“The EOA clearly has no interest in provoking a visit from you,” Vermillion said. “After the bikers, I think they realised that if we hadn’t reached an accord the last time you met, it would not have gone the way they expected.”

“We should go see my Mum now,” Taika said. “Jason’s got a date later.”

“I do not have a date,” Jason said.

“You didn’t just arrange to meet some lady in the park?” Taika asked.

“It’s not like that,” Jason said.

“You should have heard him, all smooth,” Taika said. “He was all ‘let’s not meet at the office. We should go somewhere more intimate.’ You’re good with the ladies, bro.”

“I am not going to entertain this kind of talk,” Jason said.

“Who are you meeting?” Vermillion asked.

“Just someone from the Network,” Jason said.

“Anna Tilden?” Vermillion asked.

“Asya Karadeniz.”

“Oh, nice,” Vermillion said. “Elegant beauty, I like it.”

“It’s a professional interaction,” Jason insisted.

“And what’s your profession, exactly?” Vermillion asked. “Interdimensional man of mystery? That definitely doesn’t sound like someone that mixes business with pleasure.”

“That sounds sweet,” Taika said. “You should get a theme song, bro. Something funky and sexy. Seventies-style.”

“Can we just go see your mother?” Jason asked. “I brought West Indian lime and coconut squares.”

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In the medical department of the Network’s Sydney branch, Kylie Chen was sitting alone in a dark room. She trembled not from the cold but from the battle in the incursion space playing over and over in her mind. The door opened and someone came in, turning on the light.

“Hello, Miss Chen,” came the visitor’s sympathetic voice. “How are you holding up?”

“Ms Ellis,” Kylie said standing up from the edge of the bed in the presence of a Steering Committee member.

“Please sit,” Miranda said. “After everything you’ve been through, I won’t make you stand on formality.”

Kylie hesitantly lowered herself back onto the edge of the bed and Miranda sat companionably next to her.

“I’m sorry you had to go through what you did,” Miranda said. “I’ve experienced the recording for myself. If we had any idea what kind of monster he was, we never would have let you go with him.”

“The recording device doesn’t get everything,” Kylie said in a tremulous voice. “Did you know he doesn’t use cores? Like Section Leader Thornton, but far more powerful.”

“I know.”

“That’s not all, though,” Kylie said. “There’s something in his aura. I don’t know what it is, but it’s more powerful than anything I’ve ever seen.”

“His aura strength is incredible for a category two, yes.”

“It’s more than that!”

Kylie’s voice was frantic, almost panicked, like she was desperate for someone to understand.

“Help me to understand,” Miranda asked.

“This thing inside him,” she said. “It’s like an echo of power not just above his category but beyond the very concept of categories. It’s almost... godly.”

“You think he possesses some kind of divine power?”

“I don’t know how else to describe it,” Kylie said. “When I was a girl, my grandmother used to take me to church. The priest was one of those sulphur and brimstone types, you know? I think he moved to America and joined one of those fundamentalist denominations. When Asano used that strange, bright power at the end of the fight, I was that little girl again, having nightmares of fire and judgement. It was like the fist of god coming down to punish the wicked. That’s what the thing inside Asano feels like. Old Testament power.”

Miranda nodded.

“He’s dangerous,” she said. “That’s why the committee has decided to act but we need to be careful.”

“Yes,” Kylie agreed, nodding her head. “You do.”

“We need to keep our hands clean. The International Committee wants this man, regardless of the threat to us, so we need to do this delicately, and at a remove. This

information is at the Steering Committee level only. We're only bringing in people who understand the threat and that we can trust. We can trust you, right, Kylie?"

"Of course."

"Good," Miranda said. "When the time comes, and that will be soon, I'll deliver you a message with instructions. You need to obey them without hesitation, however startling they may be. Until then, complete discretion. Speak of this only with me. Do you understand?"

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"One of the Lyon branch's members grew a conscience," Asya said. They were sitting on a bench with the outdoor fitness equipment at Yarranabbe Park. After arriving at the park, they had found one another through their auras.

"His name is Michel," she said, "and he's been at a black site the Lyon branch maintains."

"A black site? Like the CIA?"

"It's a facility whose existence wasn't divulged to the International Committee. Even our new informant doesn't know the location. The personnel, other than the Operations Director and the Steering Committee aren't allowed to know its location. Workers are taken in blind."

"And that's where they're holding the outworlder?" Jason asked.

"Yes."

She took a folder from the briefcase she brought with her and handed it over.

"They've been putting her through rendition," Asya said. "What the Americans call enhanced interrogation, but she hasn't cracked yet."

"She?"

"We don't have a name. Everything we do have is in there. He even managed to sneak out a picture, which isn't flattering. They don't exactly have her in the best conditions."

Jason opened the folder to look at the photograph that was the first thing in the file. Her hair was cut down to stubble and her face was covered with grime, but he still recognised the features.

"Jason?"

He looked like he'd been hit with a taser, his face twitching and the folder slipping between trembling fingers to spill papers onto the ground.

## Chapter 311

### My Turn

In the houseboat, Erika pulled up Jason's number on her phone.

"I would recommend against calling Mr Asano at this moment," Shade's voice came from behind her, making her jump.

"Why not?" Erika asked as she turned to look at the nerve-wracking figure. Jason's bizarre yet ever-courteous shadow monster friend was very high on the list of bizarre things she needed to adjust to.

"Mr Asano just received some important news."

"More important than his mother, brother and sister in law trying to get their heads around magic being real?"

"Yes," Shade said. "I have seen Mr Asano walk into battle knowing that death was more likely than not. I've seen him walk alone into a town that has been taken over by bandits and kill them all. I've seen him fight with thousands of lives on the line and watched him sacrifice his life to save them. I have never seen him as agitated as he is at this moment."

"That's all crazy," Erika said. "You saw him die?"

"I see that you wish to be a good sister," Shade said. "You see how damaged he is and you want to help but his experiences are outside of your understanding. I too, am concerned and would like to help you remedy this shortfall."

"How so."

"Mr Asano has vouchsafed certain recordings with me, that your daughter does not see them."

"He told me. She's already tried to convince me to let her watch them."

"I think, perhaps, that you should be the one to watch them," Shade said. "I hope it will build a bridge between you. Mr Asano has shown you the fantastical and wondrous, while avoiding the suffering he has experienced. I have seen that you want to be good family to him, but what he's been holding back lays between you. I would like to help you bridge that gap, for his sake."

Shade held out a hand made of shadow, dark as an arm-shaped void. On the palm rested a small cluster of recording crystals.

"Begin with these," he said.

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Jason was pacing back and forth in front of the bench, clenching and unclenching his fists as shame and rage warred on his face. Asya looked on in silence, picking up the dropped folder. She took a closer look at the photographs in the folder. A naked woman in a concrete room. A close up of her face, with the shaved head and the suppression collar. Clearly, Jason had not realised who she was until he saw the pictures.

“We’re doing our best to get her out,” Asya assured him, which was the truth. The international committee had been convinced by the reports of Jason’s contribution to the incursion event and were willing to make heavy concessions for his voluntary cooperation.

She strongly suspected the International Committee’s global executives had already looked the other way at the Lyon-branch’s promises of torture-extracted dividends. She believed that had changed once Jason presented both a more reliable and a more palatable option.

“You’re doing the best you’re willing to do,” Jason said, still pacing.

“Jason, we’ve essentially finalised our agreement at this point.”

Jason stopped moving as she spoke. She could feel the unsteadiness of his aura where she normally couldn’t sense it at all. It was stifling, like being in the middle seat of a car between two overweight people. He turned his gaze on her, filled with fury.

“The agreement doesn’t matter,” Jason said. “As of right now, I have one priority: protect my family, whatever that takes.”

He marched over and jabbed at the photograph in her hand.

“She is family,” said in a voice that poured ice water down her back. “If I have to burn your Network to the ground to get her back, then I will.”

He winced, then shook his head as if throwing off befuddlement. His aura settled until she could no longer feel it pushing uncomfortably against her. His eyes softened from angry to hurt and vulnerable.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a tired voice, backing off from her personal space. “My first reaction is always to fight, these days. To be willing to go further and do worse than the other guy.”

He rubbed his temples.

“I’m not the Incredible Hulk,” he said, more to himself than to her. “I know that my anger doesn’t make me stronger, as much as it feels like it should. All it does is cloud my judgement and stop me from making the considered choices that will actually get me what I want.”

“Who is she?” Asya asked.

“When I went to the other world, she was a teacher and a friend. She taught me to wield my aura but also just how to live in that world. The stronger I grow, the more I realise just how much she set me on the right path. Even after we lost her, it’s like she’s still teaching me.”

“Lost her?”

“She died,” Jason said. “Like me. And she came back to life here, also like me. Now it’s my turn to help her in a strange new world but while I’m having family barbecues and going on jet ski rides she’s being tortured in a concrete hole!”

“We’re working on it,” Asya said.

“That’s not enough, anymore,” Jason said. “I know you have no incentive to help her other than the benefits I’m offering in return, so let me be plain: There is no agreement until Farrah is safe and here. The only things I need from the Network are definitive assurances and a definitive timetable. If you can deliver that, I’ll do my best to stop her from taking revenge on you all. We have no other business until that is done, and here’s my timetable: You have until I come up with a better way to get her back myself, at which point, I will.”

Jason didn’t wait for a reply, calling up a portal and stepping through, after which it descended into the ground and vanished. Asya looked around as Yarranabbe Park had a lot of long sightlines. No one seemed to have noticed.

She let out a long sigh, setting down the folder and running her hands over her face. She took the folder and put it back in her briefcase and pulled out her phone.

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Jason portalled to Hiro and Taika, and then back to the houseboat. There was a ten minute wait between portal uses and it didn’t have the range to reach Casselton Beach in one hop. This meant a ten minute layover half way. Hiro, Jason and Taika emerged amongst trees on a small hillside that led down to a sandy beach.

“I think I’m getting used to that,” Taika said as they emerged from the portal.

“At least I’ve stopped throwing up,” Hiro said, although he was leaning against a tree with a pale face.

“It’s kind of trippy,” Taika said, slightly wobbling in place. “And I think it makes me hungry.”

Jason pulled out a cardboard food carton and handed it to Taika, who opened it up to see pieces of crumbed and fried meat, still steaming hot.

“Is this chicken?” Taika asked.



“Blood-seeker pheasant,” Jason said. He had cooked it from meat he looted from the incursion space and had been happy with how it turned out.

“Never heard of it,” Taika said and took a bite. “Oh, that’s super good. Where are we?”

“Just up from Tuncurry,” Jason said.

“It’s nice. I’m going to go check out the beach.”

As Taika wandered down the slope and out of the trees, Hiro was watching Jason.

“Are you alright,” Hiro asked.

“I’m fine.”

“Bollocks you are,” Hiro said.

Jason let out a groan.

“I just found out that I’ve been failing someone very important to me very, very badly.”

“What are you going to do about it?” Hiro asked.

“I don’t know. If I go off on a tear like I normally would, throwing around as much weight as I can bluff people into thinking I have, that will only make things worse. I have all this power but it’s not enough.”

“Is there ever enough power?” Hiro asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “There are people who are basically demigods but I don’t know if I’ll ever be that strong. Very few ever get there, or so I’m told. For all I know, they have just as many problems, but on a scale that would crush me underfoot in an instant.”

“Perhaps you should focus on what you can do for now,” Hiro suggested, “with the power you have today.”

Jason nodded.

“I need time to stop and think,” he said. “I haven’t been doing enough of that but I can’t mess this up.”

He released his frustration by fiercely kicking a tree, sending leaves tumbling to the ground.

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In his spirit vault, meditation helped Jason deal with the storm reeling through his brain. Farrah. Alive and in his world, but caught up in circumstances that filled him with white hot rage. His body was almost twitching with the need to roar off and start tearing his way through everyone who could get him closer to her. Instead, he pulled out a bronze-rank suppression collar, snapped it around his neck and went back to meditation.

In Greenstone, when Jason felt frustrated like this he would go on a monster hunt. Moving from town to village in the delta, clearing out every adventure board notice and

moving on. At least there he could channel his pent-up aggression into something that helped people.

Until he had access to the proto-astral spaces, that was not an option. Opening an aperture would not be a challenge for his current understanding of astral magic, but he would need to tap into the Network's detection grid. For the moment, seeing the Network people was not a good idea.

He'd snapped on Asya, who had done nothing more than exactly what he wanted and deserved none of his ire. She could not mask herself from his aura senses and he had felt both her sincerity and her attraction, although he only needed one of them. His life had complications enough.

Only when he thought he could see a member of the Network without dangling them from a building and demanding answers did he emerge from his spirit vault, although he did not leave his cabin on the houseboat. Shade was waiting to report.

"Your brother, your mother and your sister-in-law all wish to see you, Mr Asano. They have many questions, although your sister felt that now was not the time."

"That doesn't sound like her."

"She has been watching some of the recording crystals you redacted from the main collection. I believe she has a greater appreciation of what you have been through and how you have been affected. She had the others direct their questions toward your uncle and your father, who is also aboard, as well as herself. She has now left, however, to pick up Miss Emi."

Jason frowned and left his cabin.

"Where are they?" he asked.

"The media room."

Jason took the elevating platform down and went into the media room, where Hiro, Cheryl, Kaito and Amy were in a heated discussion. When the mist door evaporated to admit Jason, they fell silent.

"I know you have a lot of questions," Jason said softly. "Unfortunately, this is not the time for answers."

"Not the time?" his mother exclaimed. "If you think..."

Cheryl was quieted by Amy putting a restraining hand on Cheryl's arm, but Amy's gaze was locked on Jason, searching his expression and body language.

"We'll come back another day," Amy said firmly.

"Amy, are you kidding?" Kaito asked.

She turned to her husband.

“I don’t know what’s going on with him, Kai,” she said, “but today is not the day to push.”

“Thank you,” Jason said as Kaito gave his wife an unhappy look. “Shade, please show our guests out.”

Ken had been elsewhere, playing with his granddaughters. The children were delighted by the spongy cloud house, which was also pleasantly child safe. As they left, Jason returned to the elevating platform and back into his cabin. A cloud chair rose from the floor and he fell into it.

“Alright, Shade. What have you managed to turn up?”

“Still very little, I’m sorry.”

“Should I have had you send more bodies?”

“I would need to send most of them to have a significant impact,” Shade said.

“Sending them all to France would hamper my ability to react to events locally. In any case, the problems I’ve encountered over the last several days are not ones that numbers could solve. I need to be wary of the magical protections around Network facilities, as well as being careful of their silver-rankers. It means I have to primarily seek information from the lower-rank members, largely outside of their work hours.”

“Which has limited value,” Jason said.

“Indeed,” Shade agreed. “The Lyon branch practices excellent operational security. While I have heard mention of the site in which I believe your friend is being held, the location seems to be closely guarded, even amongst branch personnel. I believe that with persistence, I will catch them moving staff to the site. It is likely to take more time than you are willing to accept, however.”

“I figured as much,” Jason said. “I need to get stronger, Shade. Strong enough that no one would even think of acting against me.”

“There is no strong enough that no one will defy you, Mr Asano. The Builder possesses power beyond your ability to conceptualise, yet you defied him and you won, because he confronted you in a world of limits.”

“Speaking of great astral beings,” Jason said, “why would the Reaper let Farrah go? Doesn’t that directly contravene his agenda?”

“All the great astral beings are allowed to make exceptions with their power,” Shade said. “It is the only currency they can trade with one another, for what else is denied them? It may seem, from a limited perspective, that this world and the events you are caught up in are important, but there are more universes than you have names for numbers. There are countless strange events and exceptional circumstances. At every moment, each of

the great astral beings is taking countless actions. The Reaper making an exception like this has never happened in all the time humans have existed on your planet. If you looked across the cosmos in its entirety, however, you would find The Reaper is releasing souls at every single moment of every single day.”

“Why?”

“For his greater purpose. Individuals do not matter other than as representatives of larger trends. I believe that your friend was returned as part of a bargain with the World-Phoenix. She makes sure that you don’t become a revolving door of resurrection and he provides you with someone to aid you in whatever agenda she has in mind.”

“I don’t think I’m that important,” Jason said. “And coming back from the dead isn’t a dance craze. People can’t just start doing it because they saw me.”

“You are a small piece in a machine so large that you will never see its mechanisms in action,” Shade said. “A brick cannot hold back a flood, but a wall can. But I would advise against trying to see through the actions of beings whose scope and age may not even have limits, be that into the future or into the past. Except for the Builder.”

“What’s different about the Builder?”

“He is an ascended mortal,” Shade explained. “For reasons unknown to me, the original Builder was sanctioned. I do not know what that means, other than that the old Builder is gone and the great astral beings raised a mortal to take the vacated position.”

“Wow,” Jason said. “That might explain some of the behaviour. Still, he was awfully Thadwicky for an immortal being, raised up or not. Did the vessel impact his decision making?”

“It’s possible,” Shade said. “While I cannot speak with knowledge as to the Builder’s own circumstances, I am, myself, multifarious in nature. I occupy multiple bodies, which perhaps allows me some insight. On rare occasions, one of my bodies has become partially isolated and subject to conditions that have altered its behaviour. Each time I have reincorporated such bodies, I endured a period in which I would consider my judgement compromised. I cannot speak to a great astral being experiencing the same as a regular astral being like myself, however.”

“So, the Reaper just taped Farrah to my soul on the way through the astral?”

“Yes,” Shade said.

“And that’s a normal thing?”

“On a cosmic scale,” Shade said. “On the scale of even the two worlds you have inhabited, it is exceedingly rare.”

“But it’s happened before.”

“Yes.”

Jason was about to ask another question when his phone rang. It was Annabeth.

“I hope you’re contacting me with good news, Mrs Tilden,” Jason said.

“We haven’t got her out yet, Mr Asano, but the International Committee has agreed to form a contingent to press the Lyon branch in person, after their encroachment into our territory. That means some of our people, plus some IC heavy hitters. And you, if you want in.”

“When?”

“How quickly can you get to Bankstown Airport?”

“Very.”

“Then I’d say pack a bag, but I understand that bags aren’t really your thing. Once you reach the airport, call me and I’ll give you more specific directions.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Oh and Mr Asano?”

“Yes?”

“Miss Karadeniz went to bat for you in a very big way, today. I just thought you should know that.”

## Chapter 312

### Visually Distinctive Henchman

After deliberating, Jason decided to only leave one of Shade's bodies behind, in order to keep tabs on things in his absence. He had no idea what he would face in France but when things inevitably went wrong, he wanted his options as full as possible. Before leaving for Sydney, he portalled to his sister's house. As he emerged from the portal, Erika gave him an unhappy look.

"Uncle Jason," Emi scolded.

He noticed that the family was sitting on the floor around his portal, puzzle pieces scattered everywhere.

"Did my portal arch come up under your puzzle?" he asked.

"Yep."

"Sorry. Maybe you can redo it at my place. I'd like you to stay there for a few days."

"Why?" Erika asked suspiciously.

"I'm going away for a little while. Probably a few days, if it goes well. I'd feel better if you were staying somewhere more secure."

"Back to the other universe?" Emi asked.

"No, Moppet," Jason said. "If only it were that easy. I'm going to France."

"What's in France?" Erika asked.

"A friend in need," Jason said. "I'll tell you all about it when I get back, but I'd feel a lot better if you moved into the houseboat until then."

"We're not just going to abandon our daily lives and hide out in your magic houseboat because you aren't here, Jason."

"I know," Jason said. "But knowing you're there, at least at night, would give me some peace of mind."

"I wouldn't mind sleeping in one of those cloud beds," Ian admitted, after which Emi threw up her arms and cheered.

"Cloud bed! Cloud bed! Cloud bed!"

Erika groaned her reluctant capitulation.

"Fine," she said. "Under the condition that you answer the damn phone."

"I'm taking most of Shade's bodies with me," Jason said, "but I'm leaving one with Emi, just in case. He can reach me where phones can't."

Erika wrapped her brother in a hug.

"Are you doing something dangerous?" she asked

“Probably,” he admitted.

“Just come back to us faster this time, okay?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I’d rather you get someone better to help you and have them do their best,” she said.

“You can be kind of hopeless.”

“Harsh,” Jason said with a chuckle. “As it turns out, though, that’s exactly the plan.”

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In the underground parking structure of the Network’s Sydney branch, Miranda and Kylie were in Miranda’s car. Miranda handed Kylie an envelope and a packet.

“The envelope is your instructions in detail,” Miranda said. “Make sure you destroy it when you’re done. The packet is for him.”

“Is letting him out really the best way?” Kylie asked.

“What we’re doing here requires a patsy,” Miranda said. “He’s gone after Asano before and if he’s in one of our holding rooms that’s a solid alibi. Don’t worry, Kylie. You don’t need to do anything to any of our people. You just need to let the Frenchman go. He is still network, after all.”

Kylie nodded, although she still looked uncertain.

“Just remember the threat that Asano poses,” Miranda said and Kylie’s dull gaze grew sharp. “Good girl. Just remember, your envelope has a key card and door codes, none of which are tied to you. Memorise the codes and the security protocols and then destroy the envelope before you begin. Once you release the Frenchman and give him the packet, get out and destroy the key card as well.”

“What will you be doing?” Kylie asked.

“I’m stuck with the rough end of this operation,” Miranda said. “I need to deal with Asano without any of our people getting hurt.”

“How?” Kylie asked. “He’s so powerful.”

“We’ve done a tactical analysis based on your recording,” Miranda said. “Your contribution has been critical to protecting us from him. Now go; we need to move.”

Kylie nodded and got out of the car and Miranda drove off.

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Jason portalled as close as he could get, not having been to Bankstown Airport before, then drove the remaining distance.

“Why didn’t she arrive with me?” Jason asked Shade.

“You were delivered using the Word-Phoenix Token,” Shade said, “and subject to its specific properties.”

“So I was reborn on the same spot I was born,” Jason said.

“Precisely,” Shade said. “Given the results, it seems probable that your friend, Miss Hurin, was delivered into the world as a normal outworlder. Without a geographically specific inciting incident, such as the failed summoning that triggered your becoming an outworlder, she was likely delivered into this world at random.”

“I guess my return wasn’t a sufficiently impactful event to glom onto,” Jason said. “And here I thought I was special.”

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The Bankstown airport was better suited to discreet private charters than Sydney International, which suited the Network’s needs. Annabeth had sent Jason directions to avoid the passenger terminal and approach a small, quiet entrance to the airfield. She was startled to see his approaching car explode into darkness, only for him to stride out as the swirling darkness was sucked into his shadow.

“That’s a little more flashy than other vehicle conjurations that I’ve seen,” she said.

“My driver understands the most vital aspect of being an essence user,” Jason said. “Of all the things I learned in the other world, it stands above all the others.”

“And what’s that?” she asked.

“It’s not about being good,” Jason said. “It’s about looking good.”

“I’m going to regret having to deal with you, aren’t I?” she asked.

“Very frequently.”

Jason could feel Annabeth’s worry about his attitude in her aura. When he forcibly set the tone light, he also felt her relief. Asya, unsurprisingly, had warned her colleagues about his reaction.

She led him toward one of the private hangars, pointing out one made of tan-painted aluminium. The sign listed it as belonging to the generic-sounding GDR Services, which was the corporate face of the Network’s legitimate operations. Since involving the government, almost all of the Network’s activity had been brought under that umbrella.

“You’re coming to France?” Jason asked.

“Just seeing you off,” Annabeth said. “I’m Operation Director for the Sydney branch. Heading up the coast to your hometown is one thing, but traipsing off to France is another. Keith Culpeper and Asya Karadeniz are committee level representation, which is over my head anyway; I just supplied some staffers . Michael Aram you met briefly.”

“The guy I was talking to when the Frenchman ambushed me,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Annabeth said. “He’s quite intimidated by you, so please don’t make things hard on him. There’s also Ketevan Arziani, who you’ve yet to meet. She’s my right hand,



which means she gets to run off to France while I stay here and do the actual work. It feels like it should be the other way around. We're also sending a unit of four from Tactical Division. We can't spare any category threes, but these are category twos with experience in personal security."

They entered through the open hangar doors, where ground crew were loading luggage onto a private jet. Jason recognised Asya and Keith chatting with another pair, while the obvious security locked eyes on Jason and Annabeth as soon as they came into view.

Jason's attention was more arrested by the plane than the people. His magical senses revealed that magic was incorporated into the construction from the frame out.

"I'm glad to see that we can still impress someone who's been to a magical world," Asya said, watching his gaze linger over the plane. He turned to her, his face apologetic.

"I'm sorry about earlier, Asya," he said. "You did something to help me and I responded like a savage and I apologise. Also, thank you, which I should have said earlier instead of snapping at you. Not my finest hour."

"It's alright," she said.

"It's not, but I appreciate you saying."

"Maybe I can hold it over you the next time the Network needs a favour," Asya mused.

"Deal. How about we make some introductions and then you tell me about this plane? It's nice to meet you in the flesh, Mr Aram."

Jason offered his hand and Aram shook it. He had only spoken to Aram through Shade in the past, as a precaution against an ambush. It hadn't helped, since Jason had been ambushed by someone else entirely. Channelling his senses through his familiar was a distraction his enemy had used against him.

"I'm sorry I couldn't intervene that day," Aram said. "I saw them bundling you into the car after the category three left."

"You don't go fighting category twos when you're only a one, Mr Aram," Jason said. "Not unless you have a gold spirit coin and they're stupid enough to let you get real close."

"Gold?" Aram asked. "Is that the colour of a category four coin?"

Jason took out a gold spirit coin and flicked it into the air, the other essence users watching it like cats tracking a toy being dangled in front of them. Jason snatched it out of the air and held it up for them to see.

"I don't have a lot of these," he said, returning it to his inventory.

“We don’t have any,” Annabeth said. “The British have some from looting a category four ADE a few years ago.”

Jason was introduced to the remaining people and then they boarded the plane. Along with the Network’s contingent were the plane staff, made up of the pilots and a pair of flight attendants.

“Fancy,” Jason said, looking around at the lavish interior. There were only a handful of seats, along with a couch and a television on a low, long cabinet. Doors led to the cockpit in one direction and more of the plane’s amenities in the other.

“Shade,” Jason said. “How long until you can turn into one of these?”

“I imagine silver rank,” Shade said, the others sharing looks as the voice came out of Jason’s shadow. “The best I could manage right now would be ultralight aircraft.”

“That’s still pretty good,” Jason said.

“This plane is a product of my department,” Asya said as they took their seats. She claimed one directly facing Jason. “Research Division has been divorced from specific branches and brought under the umbrella of the International Committee. That way, breakthroughs are shared by the entire Network.”

“It’s part of a gradual progression by the Network away from the factionalisation of the past and towards truly becoming one organisation. This very trip demonstrates that there’s still a long way to go.”

“Unsurprisingly,” Ketevan said, “The main resistance comes from the branches with the most power in the existing framework. The Americans, the Chinese, some of the older European branches.”

Ketevan’s formal title was Assistant to the Director of Operations, Sydney branch. Jason guessed that she was around thirty, with an athletic build, broad shoulders and short brown hair. Her features were more handsome than pretty, Jason suspecting that she would be deeply striking should she ever reach higher rank.

“So, what does your magic plane do?” Jason asked. “Can it shoot lightning?”

“No,” Asya said with a laugh. “We went for more common use upgrades. It may not shoot lightning, but it can absorb it to help charge the batteries.”

“That’s pretty sweet,” Jason said.

“The big advantages are general performance increases and the hybrid magic-electric power plant.” Asya explained. “This plane is capable of low supersonic speeds, cruises at fifteen thousand metres and can circumnavigate the globe without stopping to recharge, all with zero emissions.”

“And you harvested the materials from proto-astral spaces?” Jason asked.

“That’s right,” Asya said.

“What does it use for fuel?” Jason asked. “You don’t have a lot of spare spirit coins, right?”

“A mix of regular electricity and lightning affinity gems,” Asya explained. “One of the keys to efficient magical technology is to lean on the magic as little as possible. Let the technology do the work and use magic to skip over the places where the tech would otherwise bottleneck.”

“Lightning quintessence and no lightning gun? Talk about your missed opportunity.”

While Jason distracted himself with light banter, his insides were roiling. He was one of the few people for whom Farrah’s return from the dead was not the most arresting point. His failure to be there for her as she was captured and subjected to ongoing suffering and indignity filled him with shame. The idea of failing to liberate her now filled him with fear.

These feelings were a cancer eating him up from the inside, even as he plastered on an unconcerned smile. Asya went along with his façade, although he could tell from her aura that she saw through it. She was doing her best to keep him distracted, which he appreciated.

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Miranda’s satellite phone rang right on schedule.

“Well?” Adrien Barbou asked without a greeting.

“It’s in motion,” Miranda said. “Your man is being liberated as we speak. Just make sure that portal is ready to go.”

“Just make sure you rendezvous with Sebastian first,” Adrien warned. “If he isn’t there, no portal.”

“That wasn’t the deal,” Miranda said. “I’ve put everything in motion and there’s no going back, now.”

“Then I suggest you hope that your arrangements for Sebastian are sufficient,” Adrien said. “What about the plane? Are you certain they won’t detect anything?”

“The explosives are completely conventional,” Miranda said. “They can sense all the magic they like and they’ll get nothing. Are your people in place?”

“The EOA’s people are on the water right now,” Adrien confirmed. “So long as the flight path you gave us was accurate, they’re where they need to be.”

“I gave you everything you need to track the transponder,” Miranda said. “In case they somehow mess up and don’t detonate, I also had a timer placed. Even if your people don’t come through, the Indian Ocean will do the job for us.”

“While I appreciate the inclusion of a contingency, Ms Ellis, that attitude does not fill me with confidence,” he said with rising scorn. “Trying to kill someone and walking away, assuming everything went to plan is the quality control of a Bond villain. I suggest you either learn to embrace thoroughness or find yourself a visually distinctive henchman and start building a death ray.”

“Coming from the guy whose category three assassin couldn’t kidnap one category two, even when he got the drop on him.”

“I chose discretion,” Adrien said. “There were only so many resources I could deploy unnoticed.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Miranda said. “You just worry about your end of the plan and make sure that portal is ready.”

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High above the Indian Ocean, the occupants of the Network’s plane were relaxing into the twenty-two hour flight.

“And the waterfall just started up again?” Ketevan asked.

“Blasted me right out of the mountain,” Jason said. “It felt like being shot from a cannon. It wasn’t just water spewing out, either. A bunch more of those monsters came out but most died on impact with the ground.”

“But you were fine,” Asya said.

“Slow fall was the one power I’d actually used enough to have a decent handle on,” Jason said. “Good thing, too, because I was all tangled up in arms and legs with the other guy, plus I’d just been fired out the side of a mountain. It’s quite disorienting. Only a handful of the monsters survived by landing in the water and they still took some bad hits from that height, so we managed to finish them off.”

“And they were shark crabs?” Ketevan asked.

“It’s not a great monster,” Jason said. “Tough carapace, and rough if it gets a hold of you with that mouth, but it’s slow and clumsy. There’s a sand variant that’s even bigger and buries itself in sand. I fought one of those later, once I knew what I was doing.”

“What’s the biggest monster you ever saw?” Asya asked.

“Oh, this is a good one,” Jason said, “I came across this one thing. It wasn’t actually a monster but a magical, carnivorous plant. I never actually saw the whole thing because it was a giant root system. Shade, what was that thing called?”

“A blood root vine,” Shade said.

“That’s it, yeah. Blood root vine. It had been growing for centuries and was the size of a small town, but completely underground. You didn’t realise you were over it until its tentacles burrowed up for you.”

“That big?” Ketevan asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Jason said. “You hadn’t signed on at that point, had you Shade? You were still running the contest.”

“The trials were not a contest,” Shade said. “The contest was Mr Bahadir’s contribution to the proceedings.”

“True,” Jason said. “I should explain from the start; it’s not like we’re going anywhere.”

Suddenly an explosion ripped through the plane.

## Chapter 313

### Of Course It Was Him

Jason came to his senses, which were an incoherent storm of sensations as he tumbled wildly through the air. His head was ringing, wind roaring over his body and through his ears. All he could see was a spinning blur of sky.

His starlight cloak manifested and he righted himself with a jolt as he moved from a tumble to a controlled glide, the cloak spreading out to either side like wings of night. Getting control of his descent was far from a smooth process as he was so far above the clouds that the very concept of up and down was elusive in the blue expanse and the chaos of the disintegrating plane.

He could only have been out for a few seconds, since the plane was still falling out of the sky around him. It had broken into two main pieces but was also a cloud of loose debris. The cloak started intercepting stray shards of metal but his body was already a roadmap of cuts and bruises, along with two more significant injuries.

One of those injuries was from a scrap of twisted fuselage impaled into his abdomen. He was largely unconcerned, no longer having internal organs there. The scar the metal was digging into was proof he'd suffered worse and he paid it no more mind than the time it took to yank the chunk free of his body.

The other major injury was a deep slash to the side of his neck. If not for the combination of his exotic physique, bronze-rank power attribute and Colin's healing, it would certainly have killed him. The confluence of those factors made what would otherwise have been lethal an inconvenience at most. The magic imbued into the plane had already allowed it to inflict damage like an iron-rank weapon, and without his bronze-rank damage reduction, it may have taken his head clean off.

The remaining bruises, abrasions and lacerations were inconsequential to him, although not to his suit. It did not self-repair anywhere near as quickly as his armour and would be out of rotation for a while. His injuries would heal much faster, Colin's regenerative power already hard at work. It was most likely the reason he regained consciousness so fast after being knocked senseless by the blast.

Dark mist appeared around his body, clinging tenaciously to him even through his downward glide. When it vanished a few moments later, Jason was garbed in his full battle attire. Rather than the loose outfit dragging, the magic shifted it to act almost like a wing suit as it recognised the conditions and adapted. Once more he was delighted by the care Gilbert had put into the bespoke garb.

Grabbing a healing potion vial from his belt, he shoved the whole thing in his mouth and crunched down, the healing potion trickling down his throat. He didn't want to spill it and his bronze-rank damage reduction prevented the glass from cutting the inside of his mouth. He felt the healing power flood his system, supplementing Colin's efforts as the two major wounds started closing.

Spitting out broken glass and the small stopper, he pushed his aura senses to the limit as he looked around. There had been thirteen people on the plane, including himself, but he was only sensing four other auras. He had awakened immediately, so they should all be within his sensory range. The ones he couldn't sense were most likely dead.

He couldn't sense any normal-rank auras. The pilots and the flight attendants had probably died in the initial explosion. There had been six bronze-rankers, including himself, Keith and the four-man security team. Ironically, all but one of the other bronze-rankers seemed to have died, while all the iron-rankers survived.

Jason guessed that the source of the explosion was close to where the security team had been sitting on the plane. The other bronze-rankers, himself and Keith, were with the iron-rankers in different section of the plane.

Jason looked closer at the auras. At fifteen kilometres up, the air was freezing and it would be hard to breathe, if that was something he needed to do. The iron-rankers who did would have a harder time of it.

He sensed the only other bronze-rank aura close by. It was one of the security people, against Jason's expectation, which probably meant that Keith was amongst the dead. That man was in a similar position to Jason, having survived the blast due to his powers and luck. The atmosphere didn't appear to bother him and he was now using a slow fall power.

The three iron-rankers had fared much worse. He could tell from their auras that they were all injured and unconscious, plunging uncontrolled through the air. At least their incredible altitude gave Jason time to act.

"Your cloak's slow fall drains your mana exponentially as you include more people," Shade reminded Jason, who was angling his glide descent in the direction of the closest iron-rank aura. The parameters of Jason's weight-reduction power was something he had tested extensively in the course of his ongoing training to explore the limits of his abilities.

The wind roaring past his ears should have made Shade's words unrecognizable but Jason heard him clearly. His bronze-rank spirit attribute enhanced his perception enough that he could pick up the sounds before the high-altitude winds and their rapid descent

carried them away. No only that, it could filter out the extraneous noise, allowing Jason to ignore it and focus on what he wanted to hear.

This was not something anyone could do and was a result of sensory techniques that Farrah had taught him during his initial training. They had not had any real effect at the time, but his trust in her led him to diligently practise until he reached bronze rank and the results spoke for themselves.

Since he had found out she was alive, he had found himself constantly reminded of everything she had done for him. Much of it was groundwork he never understood the value of until months after her death. Even as he was falling from an exploded plane, he couldn't help but think of what he owed her. He was going to make sure that no one stole his chance to show his gratitude, regardless of what they put in his path.

"You have a suggestion?" Jason asked.

"I can help them arrest their fall," Shade said. "I cannot fly as fast as they are falling, however. You will need to get my bodies to them."

"On it."

One of the advantages of Jason's cloak obtaining a gliding power was an instinctive grasp of how to navigate a fall through the sky. Otherwise, he'd have been reduced to skydiving technique he'd picked up from watching action movies.

He angled himself to plunge down, employing his cloak just enough to impart the control he needed, along with deflecting tumbling debris. Compared to the insensible flailing of the unconscious iron-rankers, he was able to easily outpace them.

His first target was the most injured, which was Annabeth's assistant, Ketevan. All of the iron-rankers were in a very bad way, but he could sense her aura dim as her life teetered on the edge. She had a chunk of fuselage stuck in her gut, like Jason had suffered, but worse. She also lacked his rank and other advantages, making her wound far more dangerous than his.

He was careful in his approach, so as not to slam into her, getting a tap in the unmentionables from a wind-thrashed arm for his trouble. Pulling her close, he shoved a bronze-rank potion into her mouth and clamped it closed with his hand, smashing the vial as he'd done in his own mouth. The glass might cut her, but it was damage that would soak up very little of the potion's healing strength.

He kept his hand in place over mouth until he sensed the magic start to reinvigorate her waning life force. One of Shade's bodies crawled from Jason onto Ketevan, taking the form of a black parachute pack.

"Nice," Jason said. "Can you control the parachute while they're unconscious?"



“Of course.”

“Wait until she recovers some more before pulling the chute,” Jason said. He himself waited a little longer for the healing potion to do some repairs before reefing the chunk of debris from her abdomen. She woke with a scream, eyes confused as she gasped in the thin, rushing air.

“Go for it, Shade,” he said and a black parachute opened up, yanking her away from Jason who continued to plummet downwards. He spotted Keith, who had suffered a similar slash to the neck as Jason but didn’t enjoy Jason’s advantages. He was a third of the way to decapitated, his clearly dead body trailing blood as it fell.

Aram and Asya received the same potion-parachute combo as Ketevan, except that Jason gave them iron-rank potions instead of over-ranked ones. Their injuries were not as life threatening, so a bronze-rank potion that would prevent them from using more potions for a good while was a poor choice. The stronger potion had helped pull Ketevan out of immediate danger, but until her body processed the residual magic, potions would be unable to heal her further.

Jason fed potions to each of the three iron-rankers and equipped them all with Shade parachutes. By the time he was done they still had not yet descended to the cloud layer. Shade controlled the parachutes to keep the iron-rankers close, while the bronze-ranker used his slow fall power to match their descent speed. He had strong lateral control that reminded Jason of Sophie’s gliding power and he suspected the man to have a wind essence.

While the three iron-rankers recovered their senses, Jason sent the bronze-ranker a party invitation so they could communicate over the rushing wind. He didn’t bother with the others because even though they had regained consciousness, they were too disoriented to accept the invitation. The bronze-ranker had participated in the incursion event with Jason, so he wasn’t surprised by it.

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➤ [\[Bruce Corwin\] has been added your party.](#)

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Jason and Bruce discussed what to do next.

“That was a conventional explosive or we would have sensed it,” Bruce said through voice chat. “If I was hitting someone without using magic, I’d have a follow-up team with magic aplenty to make sure the job was done.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Jason agreed. He was far from his field of experience and was willing to defer to the trained expert, even if they had missed the bomb.

“My guess would be a second aircraft, someone on a boat, or both,” Bruce said. “They may have even been tracking our transponder and triggered the explosion remotely.”

“We should hope for a boat,” Shade said. “I don’t have enough bodies to make a boat viable for the open ocean if we hit rough weather. If our antagonists have chosen to supply one, then you will need to pacify them and seize it.”

“I like that plan,” Jason said. “Bruce, you keep an eye on this lot. The parachutes will take care of themselves, so you’ll just need to handle any airborne threats. Is that in your skill set?”

“I have the powers for that,” Bruce said confidently. “Should I be the one to go, though?”

“Can you take on a boat full of magical hostiles alone?” Jason asked.

“Can you?”

“I’ve dealt with sand pirates before,” Jason said. “The water variety should be about the same, right?”

“Sand pirates?”

“Alright,” Jason said. “I’m going to drop down and see if I can’t secure you a landing zone.”

Jason turned off his slow fall and angled his body down.

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Jason’s sharp eyes picked out the yacht as soon as he dropped below the cloud layer.

“We’ve got a boat,” he told Bruce through voice chat. “I’ll probably drop out of voice range before I reach it, given the low magic. Seriously, though, who takes a luxury yacht to shoot down an aeroplane?”

“The French?” Bruce suggested. “We can’t be certain that the boat you’re seeing is involved, though.”

“True, but I’d take those odds. I’ll check it out before I do anything drastic.”

He descended further as the ocean below and the boat floating in it became clearer to see. As he dropped down to a low altitude he spotted a swarm of small objects rising from the yacht. As they rose up to meet him he realised they were drones.

They were not just technological objects but also magical, lighting up to his magic senses. As they drew closer, he spotted the shimmering magical bubbles around them and the glowing sigils carved into their surface.

“Are they little, magic attack drones?” he wondered. “That’s kind of cool. Still, can’t be having that. Pop out, if you would please, Gordon.”

Gordon manifested beside Jason, keeping pace with Jason using a continual series of magic dashes. As Jason suspected, the drones moved up and started attacking, projecting rapid-fire streams of tiny needles imbued with lightning magic. The drones were, impressively, bronze-rank constructions, but their inundation of attacks proved a poor tactic against Jason. His cloak sheathed itself around him and his descent was not slowed at all as the attacks were expended harmlessly against his cloak.

The drones were steel wrapped in protective bubbles, on which Gordon went to work. His disruptive-force beams cracked the magical shields while his resonating-force beams made short work of the reinforced drones underneath. The four beams swept through the drone swarm in pairs, efficiently wiping out what Jason hoped was an outrageous wealth of magical devices.

As he drew closer to sea level at a rocket pace, more attacks launched from the boat below. These were not light attacks but a trio of shoulder-mounted rockets imbued with silver-rank magic. At first, it looked like they were going to fly right past him, and not even that closely. It seemed like they were quite carelessly aimed. Then they locked onto not Jason but Gordon.

Jason immediately recalled his familiar, not trusting Gordon’s intangibility to endure the silver-rank magic he sensed from the rockets. As soon as Gordon was gone, the rockets stopped adjusting their trajectories and flew straight, making them easy to dodge. He was worried that they would go after the people above, but was out of voice range to warn them.

“Gordon, see if you can’t grab the attention of those rockets and dog fight them down. Their tracking systems can’t be that complicated.”

Gordon reappeared and started dashing up after the rockets. Jason pulled out his old non-magical telescope. Slowing his descent into a glide for stability. He eyed off the yacht below, which he realised was even bigger than he originally thought. It was the class of profoundly expensive super yachts that even all his gold might not be enough to buy.

He picked out a shadow on the sun deck made by an awning, then used his cloak to shadow jump directly onto the yacht. He immediately reconjured his cloak, which blended him into the shadows as he listened to voices coming from the deck below.

“Where did he go?” one voice asked. “Why didn’t the rockets go after him? They have magically enhanced tracking systems.”

“How would I know?” a second voice asked. “You made a big deal about these weapons to the Network man and they don’t do a thing.”

“They’re powerful weapons!” the first man insisted.

“Then maybe you got broken ones because these didn’t do a thing,” a third man said.

“You’re taking his side? You told me just this morning how impressed you were with the drones.”

Jason recognised that the three men were arguing in French. It was the result of his practise at actively listening to people to recognise the languages his power translated for him. It had been a reason to watch some of the foreign films he always told himself he should be watching instead of trashy action films. He ended up compromising by watching trashy, foreign-language action films.

The three men talking were silver-rankers, but not essence users. Their magic had the same feel as the EOA thugs that Vermillion had once talked him out of fighting. There were others around the yacht, which was no smaller or less well-appointed than his houseboat, at least from a non-magical perspective. The yacht was an ordinary vehicle, unlike the plane that had been taken out.

The bulk of the auras were bronze-rank, except for the three silvers continuing to argue on the deck.

“Where did he go?” one of them asked.

“You think I know? Maybe he turned invisible or teleported onto the boat.”

“We need to find him before the boosts wear off. We shouldn’t have taken them so early.”

“We needed to fire the rockets.”

“For all the good they did! I don’t want to come back down in the middle of a fight. They said he was dangerous.”

“We don’t even know it was him.”

“Of course it was him. You think we got lucky and he died in the plane explosion? If that was going to kill him, they wouldn’t have sent us out here to finish him off with all these weapons that don’t do a damn thing. Now we do it our way, so get everyone to start searching.”

The three split up and started yelling orders to search the yacht to the other dozen crew Jason could sense, but it was unnecessary as Jason emerged from the shadows and dropped lightly to the lower deck, landing in front of the three men.

## Chapter 314

### The Price of Transgression

Jason had just dropped lightly down to the lower deck as the boat rolled under his feet on the open ocean. The three men were startled as the object of the search they just ordered alighted right in front of them. He pushed the hood of his cloak back off his head to reveal his face and they looked each other over.

Jason saw that the magic flowing through them was complicated and felt more like the magic of an item than a living thing. Essence users, vampires like Vermillion and true magical creatures like Stash and even monsters had a magic that felt alive. In these men, the magic was more like their body parts had been used as the material for inert magical items while those body parts were still attached.

Most intriguing to Jason was that the three men were flooded with a power that was artificially raising their rank. It felt very much akin to someone using a spirit coin, but the power was not draining out of them after only a few moments.

More people were arriving to form up behind the first three. They were all bronze-rank, with less complicated magic and without the power boost flowing through them. Their magic felt like the EOA thugs he hadn't fought at Vermillion's café. They were a variant of converted, which were magically modified people he had seen the Builder cult use. The Builder's examples had been more improvised, using a modified core with extremely negative side effects. The Builder's forcibly-implanted cores essentially hijacked the body and trapped the soul, leaving mindless drones.

The ones he had seen on Earth had critical differences. For one thing, his aura senses revealed that the soul was empowered, like an essence user's, rather than sealed away to serve as little more than a magical battery. The Earth converted were also more holistically imbued with magic, rather than it all stemming from a central core. He could sense the distinct magic in their flesh, their bones and even their skin.

There seemed to be two grades of converted. One was simpler, which was the bulk of the people he could sense on the yacht. The three leaders had more sophisticated magic inside them, along with whatever power was artificially raising them to silver rank.

Jason spoke to them as the group eyed him off. His voice was sober and almost soft, with none of its usual bombast. It nonetheless carried over the noise of water slapping into the boat, a trick of voice projection that he had picked up while learning to speak without using air from his lungs.

"My name is Jason Asano," he said, "and you've come here to kill me. You won't."

He subtly employed his aura to hold their attention without provoking them, although they were clearly on the verge of launching themselves at him.

“Here’s what’s going to happen instead,” Jason continued. “You’re going to try and kill me. I’m going to make an example of one of you and then offer the survivors the chance to surrender which, to be clear, means answering my questions and handing over this boat.”

“You seriously think you can intimidate us into just giving up?” one of the three leaders asked.

“Not yet. I’d like it if I only have to kill one of you, but I imagine it will take all three of you before the others fall into line.”

Jason mentally dubbed the three leaders as numbers One, Two and Three. He could learn their names if they were smart enough to surrender. They wore heavy seaman’s clothes, heavy, warm and topped off with woollen beanies. Everyone on the yacht was a man and, aside from Jason, a heavily muscled one. It looked like someone had found a fishing crew at a gym with lax steroid abuse policies.

Under the clothes of the man Jason had mentally dubbed number one, a sigil of light started glowing. It looked to Jason exactly like a magic tattoo. Jason felt magic surge from the tattoo and into the man, who was suddenly propelled forward into a magical charge.

A second tattoo lit up on the man’s arm, which was wreathed in fire as it passed through Jason’s empty cloak. Jason had already shadow jumped through it, moving the moment he sensed the surge in magic. In another shadow a freshly conjured cloak hid him as he examined the man more closely with his magical senses.

Unlike the body-horror converted of the Builder, the Earth converted seemed to have the power to accept multiple magic tattoos. Normally one was the limit and the ability to have more could turn these converted into second-rate essence user knock-offs. They would have few and less sophisticated powers, but if they could be produced in high numbers it would be an incredible force.

He could only sense a few tattoos on each of them, though, and he knew from experience that magic tattoos had much longer cooldowns than essence powers. Of course, it was possible that limit had been broken as well.

The three were looking around for where Jason had vanished to, shouting at their subordinates to spread out and search.

“So much for making an example of us,” said Number One. “He flees at first sign of trouble.”

A line of darkness snaked from the shadow cast by the deck above, an arm holding an ornate black and red dagger. It made two shallow cuts on Number One’s leg and tried

to withdraw, but was grabbed by the silver-rank reflexes of Number Two. Despite the shadow arm's intangible nature, a small tattoo on the back of the man's hand was glowing and the hand had no trouble gripping Jason's shadow arm. The arm and the dagger both vanished as Jason relinquished the conjured items.

"He can hide in the shadows," Number Three said. "Enhance your vision."

"That will cost us boost time," Number One pointed out.

"Which gets us nothing if we spend it poking uselessly into corners," Two pointed out, supporting Three. The eyes of Two and Three started glowing bright blue, as did the previously invisible tattoos around their eyes. One's eyes reluctantly lit up after. Looking around again, they spotted Jason standing casually in the shadows.

Once their gaze locked onto him, Jason ducked through a nearby pair of sliding glass doors that opened at his approach to reveal the yacht's main saloon. It was a larger version of the bar lounge on Jason's houseboat, which Jason dashed into while casting a spell on Number One.

*"Bleed for me."*

The doors slid closed behind him, only to open as the trio rushed past their onlooking subordinates.

"Should we help?" one of the henchmen asked.

"Don't get in our way," Number Two warned them.

Inside the saloon, soft lights and the tinted windows made for few shadows and Shade's bodies started moving around the room to give Jason shadow jump options. The saloon furniture would give Jason the advantage when he could just shadow-jump around it. Combined with the room's extravagant size, he decided it would make a good place to face off with the trio of converted.

They chased him in and he cast a second spell on Number One, before jumping from one of Shade's bodies to another and casting a third. The trio were clearly used to working as a team, spreading out for maximum coverage and limiting Jason's room to manoeuvre. When Number two started using his ability to strike intangible objects to attack Shade's bodies, Jason decided to switch it up again.

His primary goal was achieved, with the affliction suite in place on Number one, so it became a matter of waiting. Recalling Shade's bodies, two of which were a little ragged from taking hits, he went through a door and deeper into the yacht.

The trio chased him through the door, up stairs and out onto the top deck, where he leapt right off and out over the water. Using his shadow arm and slow fall, he reached out to the lower deck and pulled himself back aboard, continuing the merry chase.

The trio pulled their subordinates into the pursuit with shouted orders, sending them scattering across the yacht to keep an eye out. In the mean time, Number One was increasingly suffering from the afflictions Jason had locked in place.

“Why aren’t I healing?” he asked out loud. His veins and flesh were increasingly becoming deathly black as the necrosis claimed his body at an accelerating rate.

“Because you don’t get to heal anymore,” Jason said reappearing in front of them. “You’re dead and you just don’t know it yet.”

“Fix him,” Number Two demanded. His body language screamed that he was itching to leap after Jason once more but he held himself back. He clearly understood that Jason was more likely slip away than hold still to have a remedy shaken out of him.

“I can’t help him, now,” Jason said. “He’s dead, whatever I do.”

“If I die, you’re coming with me,” Number One snarled.

“We both know that isn’t true,” Jason said. “Those of you still alive have another chance to surrender.”

“Keep chasing him,” Number One snarled, fearless even in the face of death. “All that teleporting has to cost him. His mana can’t last forever.”

Two and Three did as instructed, resuming the pursuit as Jason went back to fleeing all over and through the huge yacht. At one point, two of the bronze-rank henchmen chased him through a door to a dead end and he used his aura to suppress theirs, debilitating them with a soul attack. As he rushed past them, they each pulled out an injector even as they doubled over in pain and jabbed themselves in the legs.

The magic of their bodies advanced immediately to silver rank, as if they’d both just consumed spirit coins, but there were also differences. Their auras remained at bronze-rank and felt divorced from the magic of their bodies. Jason’s soul attack was not repelled but ignored, as if their bodies were now operating independently from their souls, operating on animal instinct. The men were slack-faced with empty eyes, more like the converted the Builder used.

They stood up straight with no indication of pain, even as wild magic coursed through their bodies. Whatever boost they injected themselves with was clearly less stable than what the trio of leaders had taken, and with far greater side effects. Jason quickly got himself away from the spooky, zombie-like henchmen.

The pursuit eventually brought Jason back to the body of Number One, who had expired on the lower deck. Two and Three arrived to see Jason draining the remnant life force from Number One’s corpse.

*“As your life was mine to reap, so your death is mine to harvest.”*



“You have the choice,” Jason called out to them as the corpse at his feet withered to a dried-out husk. “Surrender, or one of you is next. With you guys as my mana supply, I can do this all day. Can you say the same about those boosts you’re on? How long will they hold out, exactly? Is there blowback afterwards?”

Number Two snarled but Three grabbed his arm.

“He’s not wrong,” Three said fiercely. “We aren’t catching him and we used our boosts early so we could use those rockets.”

“You want to surrender?” Two asked incredulously. “After what he just did to Henri?”

“He’ll do the same to us.”

“No, he’ll die.”

Two yanked his arm free and rushed at Jason, who didn’t run. He held up his hand, his palm slick with blood as leeches started spraying like water from a garden hose. Shade appeared behind Jason, who stepped back, rising up from Number Two’s own shadow and making two shallow cuts with his dagger. Two was madly yanking leeches from his face as he yelled more in panic than pain.

Three and henchmen following the noise watched in horror as Two staggered around while Jason added more spells. Rather than run them around again, Jason was using Colin for a more brutal approach, rapidly overloading Two with afflictions. Some of the henchmen moved to go after Jason but Three ordered them back. Two’s gaze fell on the ocean water and he had a revelation, launching himself toward the edge of the yacht.

“Drop,” Jason commanded and the leeches fell instantly to the deck as Two threw himself over the side.

“Come back,” Jason commanded. The seawater splashed onto the deck by ocean swells was already having a negative effect on his leeches, killing off a decent number of them. A bloody strip emerged from the pile of Colin and flew over to Jason’s hand. The leeches melted into a ball of blood and were drawn along the bloody rag as if sucked through a straw.

Jason then went to the side of the boat where Two was treading water, glaring at him with a face already blackened with necrosis. At bronze-rank, just as at iron, Colin remained the most powerful weapon in Jason’s arsenal.

With killing number one, Jason had wanted to drag it out, to show the others his suffering. With number two he wanted to close it out quickly and demonstrate the threat he posed, so he cast another spell.

*“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”*

Two screamed as Punition piled on damage for each of the many afflictions on him.

“We surrender!” Three called out. “Can’t you let him live?”

“When I warned you,” Jason said without turning around, “it was not because I would refuse to stop. It was because I didn’t have the option. When I fight, I fight to kill. My powers offer me no alternative.”

He turned around to face Three.

“There is a price for transgressing against me. How many more of you are willing to pay it?”

He glanced back at the man suffering in the water, rising and falling with the ocean swells.

*“Feed me your sins,”*

Jason drained Two’s afflictions and left new ones in their place, which glowed as the started annihilating him from the inside out. Two was strong and resolute, but the transcendent damage was where the screaming began.

“We surrender, damn you!” Three called out. “Stop it!”

“I can’t stop it,” Jason said, his voice devoid of mercy. “I can only finish it. *Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death.*”

Behind Jason transcendent light shone down on Two. When it faded shortly thereafter, nothing was left by empty ocean.

- 
- [Elite Converted] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.
  - 413 [Euros] have been added to your inventory.
  - [Satellite Phone] has been added to your inventory.
  - [Cellular Phone] has been added to your inventory.
- 

Jason turned his gaze on Number Three.

“It’s time for us to have a talk.”

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“How did you do that?” Bruce asked, looking at the EOA thugs lined up on the deck. Most were on their knees, although two were on their backs looking decidedly unwell.

“We had an amicable chat,” Jason said, “and they decided the most prudent course was to come quietly.”

“Amicable,” Bruce said, looking at the black stain on the deck. He knew the smell of death and the black residue stank like the Devil’s armpit.

Bruce had been anxious about what they would be dropping into after the powerful rockets had come their way. He’d been able to shoot them down before they struck the semi-conscious iron-rankers but it left him with trepidation about what awaited them below.

Once he dropped back into range of Jason's voice chat, he was told to land directly on the top deck. His wind gliding power let him do so without trouble and the strange, self-guiding parachutes did so almost as easily.

Both sides had people in recovery. The Network's iron-rankers were given another round of potions, except for Ketevan who remained the most badly injured but was not yet ready for another. On the EOA side, their leader was clearly exhausted, while two of his men couldn't even stand, their auras flickering unstably.

"I told you at the start what surrender means," Jason said to Three. "I take the boat and you talk. If I think you're holding back, we go back to the other thing."

"I'll talk," Three said. "Just leave my people alone."

"Your people?" Bruce snarled. "You killed our people. My team. My friends. I should execute the lot of you."

"Don't vent your rage on the snake's body," Jason said. "Save it for when you take the head. Which Number Three here is going to tell us all about."

"Number Three?" Bruce and Number Three asked simultaneously.

"Sorry, I was just calling you that in my head," Jason said. "What's your name?"

"Reynaldo Agostinelli."

"Alright, Reynaldo," Jason said. "I have a lot of questions. Bruce, use the sat phone on the table there to check in with your people so we can figure out our next move."

Bruce picked up the phone, only for it to start ringing.

"Expecting a call?" Jason asked Reynaldo.

"It will be the man who sent us," Reynaldo said. "The Network man, Adrien Barbou. We should have checked in by now."

Jason knew that Barbou was the Operations Director of the Lyon branch, Annabeth's direct counterpart. Shade had not managed to spot him in the time he had been watching the Lyon branch.

"The Network set this up?" Bruce asked, disbelievingly. "Why would he work with the EOA?"

"I don't know," Reynaldo said. "They tell us what to do, not why."

Jason took the phone from Bruce and answered it.

## Chapter 315

### The Time For Bold, Decisive Men

“Twelve hundred kilometres is the best you can do?” Miranda complained. “And you have to wait an hour between portals? That’s pathetic.”

“Pathetic?” Remy asked incredulously. “Let’s see your portal power, bitch.”

“Remy, calm down,” Sebastian said, then turned on Miranda. “And you keep your damn mouth shut. You don’t like it, go catch a plane.”

“I thought we’d be portalling straight to France,” she said. “Where even are we?”

“Kakadu National Park,” Remy said. “We’re in one of the most beautiful places on Earth and you complain. One of the most iconic locations in your own damn country and you don’t even recognise it. How self-absorbed are you?”

They were atop a high rock formation, overlooking a river forest gorge. In the far north of Australia it was still scorching hot despite the season and the winds blowing across their high vantage offered pleasant relief.

“There isn’t an essence user in the world that can portal sixteen thousand kilometres,” Sebastian told Miranda. “There’s only a handful of people that can do a tenth of that.”

“I’ve heard the Chinese have someone they’re trying to get to category four who can do a few thousand at a time,” Remy said, “but that might be just a rumour. Maybe a category four could do sixteen thousand, so feel free to leave and go find one.”

“So much for the great portal master Barbou promised,” Miranda said. “Nothing but excuses.”

“Ellis,” Sebastian warned. “One of us is going to keep your mouth shut. I recommend it’s you.”

“I got you out of that place and this is how you treat me?” Miranda asked.

“You got me into that place,” Sebastian said. “When you told us about the outworlder, you failed to mention that he was a god damn monster.”

“It’s not my fault a category three can’t take out one category two. You even had the jump on him and you messed it up,” Miranda said. “I’m starting to think I’ve joined a ship of fools.”

Sebastian and Remy shared a glance. Remy nodded and Sebastian shrugged, before raising his arm in Miranda’s direction. Tiny metal hummingbirds were conjured all around him, buzzing forward to plunge their needle beaks into Miranda’s flesh. Sebastian followed up by dashing forward and kicking her square in the chest, sending her sailing over the side of the rock formation, bouncing off it time and again as she tumbled.

“She was right,” Sebastian said. “It is easy to take out a category two.”

“It’s for the best,” Remy said. “No way we’re hopping all the way across Asia and Europe without killing her. A personality like that is practically a suicide note.”

“Adrien won’t be happy about losing her contacts still in the Australian branch if the outworlder survives,” Sebastian said.

“You think he will? The EOA sent a dozen guys, armed up with drones and those silver-rank tracker rockets. And that’s for after his plane gets blown out of the sky.”

“That little prick is a survivor,” Sebastian said. “A hundred says he lives.”

“I’ll take that action.”

“We should let Adrien know about Ellis,” Sebastian said.

“I don’t think he’ll be worried,” Remy said, pulling out his phone. “The only thing he really wanted out of her was getting you free.”

Remy held up his phone, peering at it.

“No signal,” he said. “Can you give me the sat phone?”

Sebastian looked at the spot Miranda, who had the satellite phone, had gone over the edge.

“Uh...”

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When Jason answered the satellite phone, he didn’t have a chance to speak before the person on the other end started speaking in French.

“Why haven’t you checked in?” the voice on the phone end demanded.

“I’ll tell you all about it when we meet in person,” Jason said.

There was silence on the other end for a long time until the same voice spoke again.

“Am I speaking to Mr Asano?”

“You are,” Jason said. “Am I speaking to Mr Barbou?”

“So you got them to talk. I would have much preferred you just slaughter them all.”

“We don’t have to take such drastic action, Mr Barbou.”

“Is that so?”

“It is,” Jason said. “Now that I’m alive, your prisoner is of little use to you, if any. Whatever you might force from her, the Network will get from me quite freely. I’m going to make you an offer, which I hope you take.”

“And what’s that?”

“Give her up to me, as soon as I arrive in France. I won’t retaliate and I’ll make sure that the Lyon branch doesn’t get shut out from all the things I’ll be providing the Network.”

“That doesn’t sound like something the other branches or the International Committee will sign off on,” Barbou said.

“I don’t care,” Jason said. “I have what everyone wants, which means I get what I want, so long as I’m willing to share.”

“That’s a peaceful offer from the man who killed a bunch of people on television.”

“I’m trying to do things better. Less killing, more diplomacy.”

“What’s to stop you from coming after my head the moment you have her?”

“My need to make a deal ever again. However all this plays out, word is going to get around about what happens between you and me. If I turn on you immediately, my word becomes worthless. That puts my arrangement with the Network under threat, along with any other deal I might want to make in the future.”

“So, you offer forgiveness?” Adrien asked.

“Call it what you like. I’ve been trying to teach myself to let go of the past so it doesn’t poison my future. You and I can go at it, but I don’t care about taking you down. I care about getting her away from you. If letting you go gets me that and coming after you just endangers her, I’m happy to take her and never see you again.”

“You do remember that I tried to have you kidnapped, then I tried to have you killed. Minutes ago.”

“You’re not the first on either count,” Jason said. “I’m still alive and have a new boat, which is how it usually goes. It’s not always a boat, just whatever valuable stuff they have on them. Look, give her up. She has no value to the Network while I’m in play, which is why you’re trying to kill me but that isn’t working out. I can’t speak for the Network, but as you said, you’ve come at me twice now and you’ve seen the results. I think you’re beginning to understand what happens if you don’t turn her over to me.”

“I have to say that your timing is unfortunate.” Adrien said. “The truth is, Mr Asano, that if you made me this offer as little as three days ago, I’d probably have taken it. Unfortunately, the pressure coming down from the International Committee forced me to take steps I can no longer walk back. Otherwise, I never would have risked making these arrangements personally and you and I would have never had this scintillating chat. The Network won’t let me go, even if you do, and I’ve made promises I need your fellow outworlder to keep.”

“There’s no place you can hide that I won’t find sooner or later, Barbou. There’s no place you can run that I can’t follow.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure,” Adrien said. “Some things are beyond even your abilities, as wondrous as I’m sure they are.”

“There are still ways we can settle this,” Jason said. “I know you don’t think so, but you actually can still walk this back.”

“Mr Asano, I think you’re about to find that even you have limits.”

“Pushing my limits is kind of my thing. If you continue on this path, then you will be the means by which I demonstrate that to the magical world at large. Don’t become the example for the next person.”

“And I thought I was arrogant,” Barbou said. “Good hunting, Mr Asano.”

Jason looked at the phone in his hand after Adrien ended the call, resisting the urge to crush it in his hand. He handed the phone to Bruce.

“Unless he was lying,” Jason told him, “Barbou is going rogue from his own branch. Contact your people. This is going five kinds of sideways.”

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Adrien was standing on the roof of the abandoned water treatment plant that sat above the subterranean black site. Asano’s continued survival was a frustration but a result he had accounted for in planning his contingencies. The extra days that Paul had bought him with the International Committee was enough to move his loyalists from the black site before Paul realised he was turning on the Network altogether. Once they extracted the asset securely, he could leave it behind.

He made another call on his phone to his EOA contact. The head of the cell he was working with absurdly insisted on going by the code name Heron.

“Heron, your people failed,” Adrien said without preamble.

“Your phone etiquette is very poor,” Heron said. “Perhaps it was not me that failed but the weapons you supplied.”

“We can ascribe blame later,” Adrien said.

“Says the man who’s idea of saying hello is to accuse my people of failure.”

Adrien rolled his eyes.

“I apologise, Heron. Right now, we need to focus on what comes next. Asano survived, which means the IC will come down on us so that he doesn’t break the deal with them.”

“You mean come down on you,” Heron said.

“He took at least some of your people alive, Heron, and they’re talking. If they know about me, you can be certain they know about you. Look, we’ve been working on this for a long time and the outworlder is just a bonus. You want the knowledge and expertise of my people on essence magic for the Engineers of Ascension.”

“If we can bring the secrets of essence magic to the EOA,” Heron said gleefully, “we’ll be propelled to the top levels of the EOA power structure. So long as you hold up your end. Access to the network’s grid. The means to enter incursion spaces. The ways to use essences.”

“My bridges are burned, Heron,” Adrien said. “Our fates are connected, now. Only by making you thrive will I thrive in turn.”

“Alright,” Heron said. “What do you need?”

“I need a team of your elite people to move the asset. She’s a security risk and not all of the personnel here are loyal to me over the Network.”

“Sending them right to the black site is an overt move,” Heron said.

“The time for secrecy is over,” Adrien said. “It’s the time for bold, decisive men to take action.”

“Do we really need her?” Heron asked.

“My people can give you everything the Network has,” Adrien said. “She is the key to the things the Network doesn’t. Yet. The other outworlder is alive and the Network is realising the potential he offers. If we don’t have her, the EOA falls behind all over again.”

“Very well,” Heron said. “I actually have a strong team on standby, close to your location.”

“Heron,” Adrien said. “Did you have a strike team ready to take me out if I double crossed you? I respect that.”

Adrien frowned as he sensed magic from below. It shouldn’t be possible for him to sense the painstakingly contained magic unless something went very wrong with the magical array.

“Heron, I think you should tell your people to hurry.”

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A disgruntled-looking Sebastian reached the top of the outcropping after climbing all the way back up.

“Are you sure you couldn’t portal down?” Sebastian asked.

“I have never been to the bottom of this outcropping,” Remy said. “You cannot portal where you have never been. This is a rule of portals. You know this.”

“Then couldn’t we have both gone down and portalled to our next destination from there?”

Remy thought it over for a moment.

“Yeah, that could have worked. Did you get it?”

Sebastian took a fistful of smashed electronics from his pocket.



“She landed on it.”

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Farrah hadn't quite completed her mental map of the facility's magic array, but once they started prepping to move her to another facility she knew she had to act. The first part was the hardest, taking out a pair of bronze-rank guards. Fortunately, one panicked when she made her move and unleashed his strongest attack and she shoved the one she was choking out with her handcuffed arms into its path. Her arms were burned a little but she ignored it. Fire wouldn't have hurt her if her powers were active.

While the second guard was aghast at killing the first, Farrah took advantage of his shock and moved in, making a weird standing jump because of her leg chains. She grabbed his face, yanking his weight onto one leg as she hooked her own leg behind it and pushed forward. He was slammed into the concrete floor with a jolt and she smashed his head repeatedly into it until she was sure.

That gave her clothes and the keys to her manacles, but not her suppression collar. Forcefully removing it would most likely kill her, so she would have to get a key. The man in charge of the facility, Barbou, had been the one questioning her and kept the key on his person at all times. She would either need to find him or some magical resources to knock out a skeleton key, but she had never found a magical workshop in either her fact-finding escape attempts or as they had dragged her around the facility.

She found some tools in a maintenance storage cupboard and claimed a hammer and chisel. They allowed her to start making small but critical changes to the magic engravings on the walls, carefully altering the flow of magic in the facility's whole magical array. The magical flow was accumulating and redirecting in ways it was not designed for, and enough small changes would get big results as the excess magic stacked up.

It was a delicate balance as she needed to avoid just breaking the array and having the power drain out. The goal was for magic to gather at roughly the same rate in various points around the facility. That it was working was impressive, given the simple tools at her disposal.

Fortunately, this type of magic was her speciality and before the alarm went out and they realised she was loose, the facility was experiencing areas of dangerous magical build up. Even as security personnel started pounding through the halls, explosions started reverberating through the underground facility.

Personnel were rushing through corridors filled with concrete dust from the repeated explosions. The staccato flickering of the lights was inducing panic; each moment of darkness was a reminder of how far underground they were. Whole chunks of floor, wall

and ceiling had become rubble underfoot. In the chaos, her stolen uniform and cap allowed her to blend in, just another panicked staffer.

After setting in motion the chain reaction of blasts from the magical array, she had no more control. She was even caught in the periphery of a blast and slammed into the opposite wall, almost falling unconscious.

She wanted to evacuate with the actual staff, but the exits were the one place security was making strict checks. Instead, she managed to find her way to Barbou's office, in which she had been questioned several times as he tried carrot over stick. She didn't expect the key to be present but she spent a few precious moments searching the desk, just in case.

After unsurprisingly not finding it, she made for the strange room that held the non-magical elevating platform. She knew she wouldn't get it to operate and didn't try, instead chiselling the lock on the ceiling hatch and pulling herself up and through. There she found a metal rungs set into the concrete that led up the long shaft and started to climb.

At the top she used the chisel to pry open the doors and then forced them open with raw strength. She felt weak without her strength-enhancing ability but she still had the power attribute of an essence user at the peak of bronze.

Shoving open the doors, she staggered into the light. She was in some kind of abandoned building, which was surrounded by a metal mesh fence and then forest, with only one road leading away. Unfortunately, she was not alone.

Barbou was standing with a dozen heavily muscled men and women in dark clothes.

"Well," Barbou said. "Aren't you industrious?"

## Chapter 316

### Technical Issue

The transport helicopter touched down at a small airstrip in Sri Lanka. It was small and set amongst an expanse of grassland. The air was hot, thick and heavy with a tang of fuel, although the helicopter stirred it up. There was one hangar and a small, prefab office building. The runway itself was a line of hard-packed earth rather than asphalt.

Jason and the other survivors of the plane attack disembarked the helicopter and were met by Chathura, a local Network agent. He started leading them toward the smaller building.

“We’re still prepping your plane,” Chathura said loudly over the noise of the winding-down helicopter. “You’ll be wheels up in twenty-five.”

“We were negligent and only looked out for magical threats,” Bruce told him. “I hope you’ll be more thorough than we were.”

Bruce did not hide from his failure, being part of the security team which had failed to detect the bomb. Their oversight had gotten his team and a committee member killed, along with the crew of the plane. Once things calmed down enough that he had time to think, guilt had overtaken Bruce. He didn’t shy away from it, instead owning the shame and letting it feed his resolve to do better in the future.

Jason did not feel guilt at having been the impetus for the trip in the first place. He was ready to pay the price to get Farrah back, be that a fresh stain on his conscience from a killing spree or sacrificing some pride and giving up on vengeance. Unfortunately, he wasn’t the one paying.

The Network was at a body count of eight. While Jason felt responsible, as the impetus for the trip, he did not assign himself the blame. That, he placed on the people that took Farrah and planted the bomb; Adrien Barbou, anyone that worked for him and anyone he worked for.

Jason admitted to himself that he was glad his offer to let Barbou walk away in return for Farrah had been refused. He knew that he shouldn’t be. Intellectually, he understood that if the offer was accepted, Farrah would be free and clear. But inside him was a visceral instinct that urged him to kill everyone between him and Farrah until she was free and all the people that hurt her were dead.

That, however, was an implausible power fantasy. He’d indulged in them before, to the cost of himself and others. He thought he could outplay Elspeth Arella and Lucian Lamprey, both seasoned politicians. The reality was that he got himself tortured and

Sophie almost condemned to a life of exploitation and depravity. He'd only escaped through luck and protected Sophie by hiding under the skirts of Emir. He'd caused the problems and failed to be the solutions.

He was determined to avoid the same mistakes with Farrah. He was going to play it straight and clean, doing whatever it took to get her free. No tricks, no shortcuts. Any sacrifice he had to make personally, he would. His concern was the people around him. The aircrew hadn't deserved their fate, just for flying him.

He had a burning desire to make Barbou suffer everything done to Farrah ten times over but schooled himself to keep focused on the actual objective. Freeing Farrah took precedence over everything. His desires, his pride and his emotional satisfaction were nothing compared to that. He was still willing to let Barbou go if it guaranteed Farrah's safety and freedom.

First, he needed to reach France. The airstrip did not inspire confidence. The lush, tropical surrounds were gorgeous, but not what he wanted in an international airport.

"Seems a little out of the way," Jason said.

"Strictly speaking, this airstrip doesn't exist," Chathura explained. "It was built as part of a poaching operation but the poachers are long gone."

"Are you sure?" Bruce asked.

"Very," Chathura said. "Before we started working with the government, this place was a way station for us for dodging customs. We still use it when we don't want the government dogging us with questions. They like to be involved, which means slowing everything down."

"We appreciate the alacrity," Asya said. She had regained her senses on the yacht while awaiting the helicopter and all the surviving Network members had been healed up, at least physically. Emotionally, they remained shaken from the ordeal.

"Your Director of Operations is waiting to talk to you," Chathura said. "We have a video conference set up in the office. It seems that you weren't the only ones to experience some excitement."

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Farrah didn't fight like Sophie or Jason. Their power sets encouraged agility and speed. Farrah's powers gave her enhanced strength and heavy stone armour, which lent itself to a very different style, more akin to Humphrey's. That was not to say that she was any less skilled, at least than Jason. What might seem like a crude, brawler style at first glance made expert use of weight, leverage and strength.

Constrained by the collar Farrah did not have her full, power-driven might, nor the mass of her stone armour. That was not enough to invalidate her fighting style, though. Her peak bronze attributes were superior to those of the EOA thugs, and even if they weren't, she'd fought monsters and people both that met or even matched her strength and weight.

There were more ways in which Farrah was unlike Jason. She didn't stop to banter, immediately leaping into action. She hurled herself forward, charging toward the closest thug like a freight train. Dropping her centre of gravity right before impact, he tumbled over her like she'd hit him with a car, the impact barely slowing her down. As he fell to the ground behind her, she was already crashing into the next thug. It was a glancing blow as she spun around and behind him, with an elbow to the ear as a going away present.

Her goal was Barbou and the key to her suppression collar. She knew that if she didn't get it off, there was no overcoming this many enemies. Breaking through the two thugs opened a path and she made straight for him, who raised a hand and blasted air in her direction.

Recognising the shimmer of a compressed air attack, she juked left. If it had caught her square she would have been sent tumbling back. As it was, it still arrested her forward momentum. It was enough time for the rest of the thugs to charge in for the attack while Barbou launched himself into the air and started hovering out of her reach.

Farrah was not a large woman, but she was stronger than the burly men coming at her. Where Jason or Sophie might dance around them, Farrah met offence with offence. The first thug was left staggering off, clutching an elbow now bending the wrong way. The next collapsed with a knee in the same condition while the third one hadn't guarded his face well enough and had a pair of thumbs dig into his eyes.

Despite her good start, Farrah was fighting against the inevitable. The leader of the thugs ordered half his men to dose up and they injected themselves with a boost that ramped them from bronze-rank to false-silver while the rest kept her occupied.

This was a special purpose squad, made up entirely of elite converted. They did not lose their rationality when they boosted and they had magic tattoos, adding a handful of magical abilities to their options. One used a power to conjured a rope that he used to catch one of Farrah's arms it. Once Barbou was out of reach the fight was already over. She made them pay a blood price for victory, though.

When she was finally unconscious on the ground, Barbou descended back down.

"Thanks for your help," the leader of the EOA said sarcastically. His name was Pavel and his French was lightly accented with Russian.

“Your elite team leaves a lot to be desired,” Barbou said, looking around. “One small woman with her powers suppressed took out half of your team.”

Fully half of the thugs were sitting or lying around, being tended by the rest. One of the ones that hadn’t boosted himself had been killed outright.

“If only we had an essence user to help us,” Pavel said. “I lost a team member because you lacked the courage to fight one power-suppressed woman. The survivors of my team will heal in time, but I think you need to supply some of those famous magic potions the Network has.”

“You think I just carry a bunch of healing potions around?” Barbou said.

“A self-serving prick like you?” Pavel said. “Yeah, I think you do.”

Barbou gave Pavel a flat look, then broke into a chuckle.

“Yes, very well.”

The abandoned water treatment plant had the two large vans that the EOA team had arrived in parked just inside the gate. Barbou moved over to a storage shed that looked like it hadn’t opened in decades, but the door slid open on a perfectly lubricated rail with barely a rumble of ball bearings. Inside was Barbou’s own car, a high-end Mercedes. He retrieved a padded box from the glove compartment containing a rack of vials, which he handed over to Pavel.

“Get your men on their feet and we’ll head straight for the fortress.”

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“...we have her in custody,” Annabeth continued, “but Sebastian was out of the building before anyone was the wiser. Miranda was quite thorough in her preparations. Miranda herself was long gone before any of it happened and we have no idea where she is. If she’s smart she’ll stay under whatever rock she’s crawled under and never come out. If I get my hands on her I’m going to tear her hair out and strangle her with it.”

“So, what now?” Ketevan asked.

“Asano,” Annabeth said. “I assume that your intention is to continue to France?”

“It is,” Jason said.

“A plane is being made ready as we speak. The good news is that the Lyon branch had contacted the IC and is ready to fully cooperate. The bad news is that their operations director has gone rogue. The international Committee is assembling a response force to hunt him down; a multi-branch group from across Europe. If he’s defected to an EOA cell then he will potentially hand off dangerous secrets. Not just those of an Operations Director, either.”

“He’s trying to pass my friend off to the EOA since she has limited value to the Network?” Jason asked.

“That may only be the beginning, from what I’m learning,” Annabeth said. “You’ll be briefed further on landing. For now, get on your plane and go. If the rest of you would go, I’d like a word with Asano.”

Chathura led the other out, leaving Jason alone with Annabeth on the screen.

“Thank you for getting our people out,” Annabeth said. “Mr Corwin said that if it weren’t for you, you and he would have been the only survivors.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do anything for the others,” Jason said. “And don’t let Bruce sell his contribution short. My familiar was only able to stop one of the rockets that went by me. If Bruce hadn’t stopped the others, they would have found targets. Without him, there really wouldn’t have been other survivors.”

“Thank you for saying,” Annabeth said. “There was one other thing I wished to discuss, which was the security of your family. It’s unlikely but not impossible that Miranda, Sebastian or both will attempt to use them as some kind of leverage. I’ve dispatched a security team to watch over them and I suggest you enact whatever measures that you have in place.”

“Thank you, Anna. I set things in motions the moment you told us that Sebastian was loose.”

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Emi arrived in front of her mother’s Castle Heads restaurant on a jet black motorised scooter. As she was taking off her helmet, she was approached by a pair of uniformed police officers.

“Miss, I’m afraid you can’t ride a motorised scooter in New South Wales, especially at your age. I know that a lot of stores are claiming it’s legal, but that isn’t the case.”

Emi absently meandered with a thoughtful expression, placing the officers between herself and the scooter. They turned to watch her.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about, officers,” she said, scratching her head with one hand while the helmet was tucked under the other arm.

“The scooter you were just riding,” one of the officers said.

“What scooter?” she asked, the picture of innocent confusion.

“This scoo... where did it go?”

While the two officers were looking at the spot the scooter had vanished from, Shade took the helmet from Emi and placed it into his storage space before snaking back into her shadow. The officers turned back to Emi.

“What happened to the scooter?” one of them asked.

“Are you alright, officers?” Emi asked. “Has it been a long shift?”

“Where’s your helmet?” the other officer asked.

“What helmet?”

“Young lady, what’s your name?”

Emi pulled out her phone and started recording video.

“Put that away,” one of the officers said.

“If you’re going to fine me for riding an imaginary scooter,” Emi said, “then I’m going to film this interaction for the hearing where I contest it. Would you please point to the scooter that you allege I was riding?”

“You little…”

“It’s not worth it,” the other officer said, putting a restraining hand on her partner’s arm. Just let it go.”

“You could have handled that in a much less provocative manner,” Shade told her.

“You seemed to go along with it quite smoothly,” Emi said.

“I know a man with similar proclivities. We should go talk to your mother.”

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Behind her restaurant, Erika was talking to Jason through Shade while Emi was inside, devouring a panna cotta.

“This might take some getting used to,” Erika said.

“Well, there’s some stuff going on, so you’ll need to raise the bar for how quickly you can adjust to things. Talking through Shade is like using a phone, except he’s way, way better. Also, could you give me a panna cotta too?”

“Aren’t you on a plane to France?”

“I’m in Sri Lanka right now,” Jason said. “There was a technical issue with the plane and they’re switching us to a new one. Just give one to Shade, who can store it there, and bring it out here. It’s super handy.”

“You can teleport a dessert to Sri Lanka?”

“I have the power. Like He-Man, but with desserts instead of startling homo-eroticism.”

“Jason, I’m doors open in less than two hours. I don’t have time for you to be you. What’s this about?”

“You promise not to freak out?”

“No. Tell me anyway.”



“Okay, so this didn’t really come up in conversation, but last week I got a little bit kidnapped.”

“What?” Erika exclaimed.

“It’s fine. I unkidnapped myself almost immediately, and the guy responsible has been locked up ever since.”

“You were kidnapped?”

“I know,” Jason said. “It’s a whole thing, but we need to push on to what’s happening now. The guy escaped, which is not great, obviously. It’s just a precaution, but some security people will be arriving very soon to make sure he doesn’t come after you.”

“Why would he come after us?”

“I don’t think he would,” Jason said. “He may even think I died when my plane blew up.”

“WHAT?”

## Chapter 317

### The Long Game

In the time it took Jason's plane to arrive in France, circumstances on the ground had gone through significant changes. The Sydney Network team was met by a driver who took them in the direction of the Network's Lyon branch to participate in an operational briefing.

"It's a beautiful city," Jason said as they drove.

"It'd be a nice posting if the local branch wasn't a nest of vipers," Asya said. "We've come a long way from debate club. Back then, I never would have anticipated a mid-air rescue from an exploding plane."

"Are you sure the local branch has been taken in hand?" Jason asked.

"Quite certain," Asya said. She had been briefed by the International Committee while they were still in flight, passing the information on to Jason and the members of the Sydney branch.

The Lyon branch had discovered that their Operations Director had gone rogue and sold them out to the EOA. Their Steering Committee realised that unless they came very clean, very quickly, their branch was going to be purged. That was a rare event, given that the International Committee itself did not have the authority. Only by agreement of the majority of the Network's member branches could one of those members be acted on punitively. Scrambling to avoid that fate, the Lyon's branch had invited the International Committee in, giving them free reign to sweep in and administer operations until local affairs were back in order.

The Network office was not located in one of Lyon's gorgeous buildings but a disappointingly plain office park. As with the Network's Sydney branch, Jason could detect a magical array protecting the core sections of the building. They were taken to an area on the ground floor that did not contain sensitive operations and was not within the array's protective magic.

In a briefing room full of milling people, Jason was given several introductions. One was to Hector De Lange, a Belgian man from the International Committee who was in charge of proceedings. Another was to the leader of the International Committee's assembled tactical response team, Acting Director of Tactical Operation Karen Espinoza. She was introduced to him by Bruce as the acting Ditto.

"I've heard that you can fight like a category three or better," Espinoza said to Jason.

"It takes the right circumstances," Jason said.

“Well, we’ve put together a multi-branch platoon of three nine-person sections, with four category threes to a section,” Espinoza said. “I’m willing to take you on, if you want it. I’d like you see what you can do for myself.”

Espinoza was a bullet of a woman, all no-nonsense capability. Most of the silver-rank tactical personnel Jason had seen looked like models for a line of military-style fashion. Even with the beautifying effects of silver-rank, Espinoza was every-inch the soldier.

“I’d like that, Acting Director,” Jason said, “but I’m not sure you want me. Whatever objectives you might have around Barbou and whoever he’s with, my only objective is getting my friend back. Most likely that puts us on the same team, but if it comes down to getting her back or catching Barbou, there are circumstances that could put us at odds. You’re probably better off without that kind of liability in your ranks.”

Espinoza gave Jason an assessing look.

“I appreciate your forthrightness,” she said. “if you’re not part of my tactical operation, what do you intend to do, exactly?”

“Whatever it takes, to get my friend back,” Jason said. “I’m hoping that what it takes is letting you and your team do your thing, but I get a feeling that it won’t go that smoothly.”

“It never does,” Espinoza said. “Alright, Asano. I don’t want you running around rogue if I can help it, so how about this: attach yourself to my team, and if you’re going to go off the reservation, let me know.”

“You’re being awfully accommodating, Acting Director.”

“Just call me Espinoza,” she said. “My information is that you’re the solution to our escalating monster level problem.”

“That’s the idea,” Jason said.

“That’s why I’ve been told to keep you safe and happy. Frankly, I’d rather keep you where I can keep an eye on you. If you’re going to cause me problems, I at least want to see them coming.”

“That sounds fair,” Jason said.

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Hector and Espinoza called the room to order and began a briefing into the upcoming operation. Everyone was seated, Jason at the back with the Sydney branch, with Asya sitting next to him.

“The Lyon branch, as it turns out,” Hector said, “had been hiding more than an off-the-books black site. We knew of the existence of this black site, although not its location. That, as it turned out, was just another layer of misdirection, designed to keep us from

realising a deeper secret. A member of the Lyon branch's Steering Committee will explain. Mr Abreo, if you would?"

A haggard-looking man moved from the side of the room to take Hector's place behind the speaker's podium. He had a core-fused bronze-rank aura and being in a room full with more than a dozen silver-rankers wasn't serving to reduce the stress that looked to have kept him from a good night's sleep.

"My name is Paul Abreo, and as Mr De Lange said, I am part of the Lyon branch Steering Committee. Unfortunately, many of the decisions that led to us all being here today were, at least in part, mine. I've been asked to provide some context before Mr De Lange goes into the detail on upcoming operations."

He tapped the touch screen on the podium and a map appeared on the wall monitor behind him.

➤ "In 1948," Abreo said, "local Network operatives discovered a number of anomalous factors with an incursion space dimensionally coterminous with an area near Saint-Étienne. Not only did it have multiple apertures in the region, which is unusual in and of itself, but the incursion space remained stable past the normal window. In short, it had become a permanent dimensional space."

Jason had wondered if earth had any proper astral spaces from the moment he learned about the proto-astral spaces. Now he had his answer.

"The Steering Committee of the Lyon branch at that time," Abreo continued, "made the decision to monopolise the dimensional space and any potential benefits it offered. Which meant hiding it from the rest of the Network. At the time, the Network was much more fractious than..."

"Justifications can come later," Hector interrupted. "Relevant details, Mr Abreo."  
Abreo sighed, clearly reluctant.

"In order to monopolise the space," he said, "it was required to hide the astral space from the Network. Obviously, the fact that every branch has access to the Grid was a problem, given that the Grid's express purpose is to identify and monitor dimensional spaces. As this predated computer monitoring, there was some leeway. The initial action was to disable the grid in that local area, claiming that there was an infrastructure collapse. While the branch told the International Committee that they were working to fix it, they were, in fact, developing the means to falsify the Grid being active."

Abreo paused, looking around the room with trepidation.

"They were successful," he said. "That sector of the grid has been offline for the last seventy years."

That statement triggered a susurrus of murmured disbelief.

“The prevailing wisdom of the time,” Abreo spoke loudly over the noise, “was that with a dimensional space already in place, another one was not going to appear, rendering the Grid pointless in that area anyway.”

Abreo’s excuses only fuelled the fire as the room full of Network members exploded with outrage. Asya, sitting next to Jason, leaned over for an explanation.

“We Network members may be prone to inter-branch politicking,” she said, “but we’re united by a sense of duty to protect our world. None of us are too good to be at least a little self-serving, but this violates the core tenets of our unifying purpose. There’s no way they don’t purge the Lyon branch after this.”

Hector stood up to calm the group down.

“There will be time for recriminations later,” he said. “Right now, there’s work to do. Mr Abreo, please continue.”

Hector once again ceded the podium to Abreo, who was now faced with a deeply hostile audience.

“Over time, our branch developed the dimensional space, which came to be referred to as the dimensional fortress. It was named as such both for the nature of the dimensional space and for its purpose as an ultimate fallback in the case of catastrophic events that seem more likely now than even then.”

Jason leaned closer to Asya.

“Catastrophic events?” he asked.

“There’s been growing concern that the escalation in dimensional incursions may outstrip our ability to intercede,” Asya said.

“You’re talking about a monster apocalypse.”

“Something like that,” she said and Jason turned his attention back to Abreo.

“...came under the influence of each succeeding Operations Director,” Abreo was continuing. “Which brings us to Adrien Barbou. I considered this man a friend, so I was betrayed as much as anyone by the revelation that he was working with the EOA. Once I realised this, I naturally contacted the International...”

“Thank you, Mr Abreo,” Hector said, standing up. “I think I can take things from here.”

He replaced Abreo at the podium while Abreo stood to the side, flanked on either side by bronze-rankers who did not look to be his subordinates.

“Adrien Barbou,” Hector said, “was part of the highly secretive and highly selective group of Lyon branch staff who knew of and worked in the so-called dimensional fortress. We now believe that he has been cultivating loyalists from within the Network’s ranks and

that he stepped this activity up after being made Operations Director. It is highly likely that anyone and everyone in the dimensional fortress is one of his, not one of ours.”

“What’s the big deal about this dimensional space?” someone asked from the front. “What’s so important about an incursion space that doesn’t go away?”

“The key feature of the permanent dimensional space,” Hector said, “is that it appears to have a naturally heightened level of magic. That means the environment is beneficial for essence users, as well as producing magical materials. More importantly, dimensional entities manifest directly into the space. Primarily category ones, but also category twos on a regular basis and on two occasions, category threes.”

It sounded to Jason like the magical density of the space was similar to that of Greenstone.

“The dimensional fortress is a DE hunting reserve,” Hector continued, “and over the last seventy years the Lyon branch has stockpiled resources. Most critically, they have figured out how to use the space to generate spirit coins.”

“Spirit coin farm,” Jason murmured to himself in surprise.

“The dimensional fortress is possibly the most important strategic asset on or adjacent to the planet Earth,” Hector said. “Right now, Barbou is holed up inside it, having sealed the apertures from the inside. He clearly recognised that he was tipping his hand in being so overt in his attempt to kill Mr Asano, who we have with us here today and is the second most important strategic asset we know of. Or, Barbou possibly tried to kill him because he was ready to make his move. Whatever the case, it precipitated some kind of incident at the Lyon branch black site. We’re still figuring out exactly what happened.”

“What about the outworlder he was holding at the black site?” Jason asked.

“We have confirmed that she was a prisoner of Barbou and the EOA when they entered the dimensional fortress,” Hector said.

“What does he hope to achieve?” a person down the front asked. “Can’t we just guard the apertures so he can’t come out?”

“That is what we’re doing right now,” Hector said. “We have teams that we know Barbou hasn’t compromised, preventing his escape from the dimensional space. Calling it a dimensional fortress is not just for show, however. He has sealed the apertures from the inside and we can’t get in. We have ritual specialists working on it as we speak, but they aren’t optimistic. Right this second, none of us can do anything but sit on our hands and wait.”

“What’s the point?” the person at the front asked. “If he’s stuck in there, why bother with it at all?”

“Barbou has been recruiting from within the Network,” Hector said. “He’s been working towards the entire staff occupying the dimensional fortress being personally loyal to him. He most likely has full control of the space. Our current thinking is that he’s playing a long game. Either he believes that the EOA will come into conflict with the Network and liberate him or that the dimensional space escalation problem is far worse than is generally accepted and the dimensional fortress will become a key refuge that he can leverage. He has the resources there to remain inside without external supply. In fact, the dimensional space was a major source of resources for the Lyon branch. He simply doesn’t need to come out.”

Hector tapped the podium touch screen and four points lit up on the map.

“These are the locations of the apertures to the dimensional space,” he explained. “As we speak there are people attempting to breach the seals on those apertures. We are on standby until one of those apertures is opened.”

The back and forth of the briefing continued but the details mattered little to Jason. He spoke up again when Hector called for questions.

“Where does the outworlder fit into this?” he asked. “How did she end up involved?”

“For that, you’ll have to ask Mr Abreo,” Hector said, gesturing for Abreo to return to the podium.

“We first became aware of the outworlder when the twin anomalous signals appeared on the Grid simultaneously, in Australia and here in France. Our signal was right near the edge of the Saint-Étienne dead zone, close to one of the apertures. Our original suspicion was that it was somehow related to an attempt to investigate the dimensional fortress by another branch that went awry. Our people were stationed close, near the aperture, and we moved quickly, finding the woman unconscious. We secured her with a suppression collar and moved her to the black site.”

Jason kept his aura restrained but everyone in the room felt it boil like a witch’s cauldron.

“Once we realised what she was and the potential she represented,” Abreo said, “we were already past the point of diplomacy. In any case, we were used to having resources the rest of the Network did not and knew that if we were open about it, the International Committee would remove her in order to improve the general capacity of the other branches to resist the incursions.”

The room was once again unsettled at the naked betrayal of their core purpose.

“We realised that the Australian signal was likely another outworlder. As we hadn’t heard anything, this meant that either the local branch there was hiding him, like we were

with ours, or their outworlder was still at large. Adrien advocated for having the Australian outworlder captured or, failing that, eliminated. The Steering Committee reluctantly agreed, under the stipulation that we send a stealth specialist, rather than the more aggressive team Barbou wanted. The goal was to remain unnoticed, or at least unidentifiable, even in failure.”

“Which went out the window when I left your guy limping to the local branch while I killed his support team,” Jason said. “Sorry, allegedly killed his support team. I totally didn’t do it.”

“You’re the outworlder?” Abreo asked, turning pale.

“Yep,” Jason said, standing up. “So, just to be clear. You found my friend unconscious, slapped a collar on her, realised she wasn’t what you thought but you’d already screwed her over too much to cooperate and decided to torture what you could out of her. Would that be an accurate description?”

Abreo stood trembling, too scared to answer.

“Mr Asano,” Hector said. “I understand that you’re emotional, but please restrain your aura.”

Jason turned a look on Hector that made him flinch before he got himself under control.

“Somebody show me one of these apertures,” he growled.



## Chapter 318

### A Moment For Drastic Measures

The aperture was in a tent that had been set up around it, with a makeshift military camp assembled around that. The story was the usual terrorism readiness exercise. The tent was almost of circus proportions, easily fitting a Network ritualist, Hector, Espinoza, plus Jason, with Asya as an escort and Abreo, with a pair of burly bronze-rankers as an escort. On top of that was the ritual circle around the aperture.

The aperture normally would have been invisible, but the ritual circle drawn under it was causing it to crackle with energy, revealing its circular shape.

“Sir,” one of the Network’s ritualists said, “we just don’t have a way in. I don’t see a means to break a ritual on the other side of the aperture from this side.”

“How long will it take to change that?” Hector asked.

“How long did it take to go from dial phones to cellular phones?” the ritualist asked. “Unless you have a whole new field of magic sitting around somewhere, we’re done here.”

“Mr Asano,” Hector said. “You’re meant to be the great font of knowledge from another world. Do you have a whole new field of magic sitting around somewhere?”

“Yep,” Jason said, not moving his eyes from the aperture.

“Then by all means, proceed.”

Jason looked down at the purpose-built wooden boards with the ritual circle drawn onto them. They were tightly slotted together so as to not break the ritual circle drawn onto them. Jason broke the ritual himself by drawing his foot through a chalk line in the magical diagram and the visible magic it contained faded and dispersed.

“Turn off those mana lamps until I need them,” Jason instructed. “I’m going to have to start with a harmony ritual to balance out the ambient magic, which I won’t need them for.”

The harmony ritual was one of the few lesser rituals that didn’t require iron-rank magical density. It served the same function as Clive’s Mana Equilibrium racial gift, except it took more effort, more time, some lesser spirit coins and wasn’t as effective.

Clive could level out the ambient magic with a snap of his fingers, doing such a thorough job he never needed to adjust his ritual circles. Even after performing his first ritual and having the mana lamps turned back on, Jason still needed to use powdered lesser monster cores to gauge how his second ritual was interacting with the ambient magic.

“This will open up the aperture?” Hector asked as Jason’s ritual become more and more complex. He was constantly referencing Clive’s notes, which Jason was lucky to

have access to. Clive had kept them with Jason's books on astral magic, which was beneficial to Jason after losing Clive as a resource.

"It won't," Jason said. "The purpose of this ritual is to figure out what we're dealing with."

When he enacted the ritual, it seemed at first like the one the ritualists had used, leaving magic crackling over the invisible aperture.

"So much for that," the ritualist said, happy not to have been shown up.

"Wait for it," Jason said, eyes still locked on the aperture. Slowly there was a shift in the magic and the crackling energy started forming into distinct shapes. Eventually the aperture was covered in floating, glowing runes that shifted, merged, split and transformed in complex patterns.

Shade emerged from Jason's shadow to stand next to him, to the surprise of the other people in the tent except for Asya.

"What do you think?" Jason asked him.

"I have little grasp of ritual magic," Shade said. "To my eye, however, it does seem less sophisticated than the seal locking the Order of the Reaper's astral space."

"It is," Jason said. "By a lot. That said, Clive and Emir's team took months cracking that seal. Testing, analysing, retesting. Even if I wasn't reliant on mana lamps for that, which I very much am, it will be time consuming. It may not be months, but I'm not Clive. Unless I get lottery win lucky, it'll be weeks."

"You're saying you can open it?" Hector asked.

"Very eventually," Jason said and turned to Abreo. "If you're holding anything back, Abreo, now is the time to talk."

Jason walked over to stand in front of Abreo, who shrank away only to bump into one of his unmoving escorts.

"If I discover that you could have helped me here and you didn't," Jason told him, his voice low and resonant, "the Network can't protect you from me. I will do to you what your men failed to do to me and take you away. The subsequent final few weeks of your life will be an experience that cannot be described, only felt. Do you know what it's like to have your soul scoured, Mr Abreo? It changes you. Marks you. No healing potion or magic power can undo it."

Abreo's gaze lingered on the scars on Jason's face as he trembled, almost shaking. Fear stained his aura like a poison, even as Jason's aura ground Abreo's into nothing, pressing on his soul like a knife to the throat.

“I can’t do anything, I swear! don’t know a way in. That was all Adrien’s to manage. Oh god, please believe me!”

Abreo’s guards were wide-eyed at the display of aura power, but when they glanced at Hector he shook his head, signalling them not to intervene. Jason relaxed his aura suppression and turned back to the aperture.

“Taking weeks to get through is better than not getting through at all,” Hector said. “They’re bottled up and not going anywhere.”

“Not good enough,” Jason said.

“Obviously, we’ll be looking for alternatives,” Hector told him, “but it’s exceptional enough that we can get in there eventually. Getting through right now is impossible. We need to accept that and direct our energies where they can actually accomplish something.”

“It’s been my experience,” Jason said, eyes once more glued to the aperture, “that much of what people call impossible is an unwillingness to accept the price of moving forward.”

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “I worry that you are going to make a decision with long-term ramifications in the heat of the moment.”

“You’re a smart guy, Shade,” Jason said. “That’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

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#### Ability: [Nirvanic Transfiguration]

- This ability will be evolved from the ability [Astral Affinity].
- Your body and soul will be combined into a gestalt entity both physical and spiritual in nature. This state will grant inherent resistance to effects that utilise the soul-body disconnect.
- The nature of your new body will render you immune to resurrection effects, including those of high-rank healing magic. If your body is disincorporated, your soul will return to a purely spiritual state, unable to reinhabit a physical form or re-enter a physical reality. This prevents the natural formation of an outworlder body on entering a physical reality. These restrictions will change on reaching diamond rank.
- When suffering lethal damage, instead of dying, your new body will undergo a nirvanic rebirth, returning to a state of full integrity. This effect cannot be triggered again until you have increased in rank from the last time it was used. This ability will change on reaching diamond rank.
- The strength of your aura will significantly increase.
- Your resistance to hostile dimension effects and disruptive force damage will be increased. This is an enhancement of the [Astral Affinity] ability.

- The effect of your dimension effects and your transcendent damage will be increased. This is a legacy effect of the [Astral Affinity] ability.
  - Physical reality around you will be more stable. You will be able to sense nearby astral space apertures and proto-astral spaces coterminous to your location.
  - You will be able to traverse astral space apertures, including those that are closed or have been sealed.
  - You will be able to directly enter proto-astral spaces coterminous with your location or directly leave a proto-astral space to a coterminous location.
  - While within the astral you will be able to create and maintain a small zone of physical reality around you. This does not grant the ability to enter or traverse the astral.
- 

Of the many effects of the strange ability offered to him by the World-Phoenix, the ability to pass through sealed astral space apertures had seemed like a minor consideration. In this moment, it was a more crucial power than coming back from the dead.

“You held well-reasoned reservations about that power,” Shade said. “The wiser course would be to take some time to cool down and consider the consequences of claiming this power.”

“I already know the ramifications of not taking it,” Jason said. “Farrah in the hands of that man for weeks while I pick a lock, when I could have slipped in the window.”

“Have you not considered that you may have been offered this power in anticipation of this very scenario?” Shade asked. “The World-Phoenix may well have placed her where she arrived as part of engineering this result.”

“Of course it has,” Jason said. “But even if that is the World-Phoenix’s plan, my knowing that doesn’t mean it won’t work. This is what I need right now and what did I say, Shade?”

“Whatever it takes,” Shade said. “This is not a trivial choice, Mr Asano. Jason, this will change you. Fundamentally.”

Jason finally tore his eyes from the aperture to look at Shade.

“You’ve never used my first name before.”

“It is a moment for drastic measures, Mr Asano. I believe that you have the potential to reach the pinnacle of power and throw off the shackles of a mortal lifespan. This is a decision that may follow you for eternity.”

Jason looked at Shade for a long time, then turned back to the aperture.

“Shade, do you remember what my Dad said about big decisions?”

“Yes,” Shade said. “He advised that you consider the person you want to be.”

“If I’m going to live with this forever – and I think that’s a much bigger if than you suggest – then I want to be the man who chose to do whatever he could to save his friend.”

“Then you have your decision,” Shade said.

“I don’t suppose anyone wants to fill me in on what you’re talking about?” Hector asked.

“No,” Jason said.

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➤ You can accept ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration]. Accept Y/N?

---

Jason mentally accepted the offer and silver light immediately started shining from within his body. Light started pouring from his mouth and his eyes, shining through his skin to make his veins and even his skeleton visible. The pain began early, not just to his body but his soul, but this was something he had endured in the past.

The other people in the tent looked on, startled, as the light shining from him grew brighter. They backed off as Jason’s clothes disintegrated around him, his skin becoming increasingly translucent. The veins and arteries in his body were absorbed, vanishing as his body moved even further from the human norm. Only his bones and the scars on his body remained visible in his increasingly transparent flesh.

The ritual on the aperture was washed away and the onlookers abandoned the tent entirely as they sensed the strange vortex of magic centred on Jason. Shortly thereafter, the tent itself was disintegrated like his clothes. The Network’s tactical units scrambled to surround him at a safe distance, a firing line of magical guns pointed in his direction.

Jason’s flesh completed the transition to translucency, making his scars stand out all the more. The onlookers watched as the white bones of his skeleton were transformed into silver metal.

Once that process was complete, an amorphous murk appeared within his translucent form, like a stain. It started moving to the surface of his body and splattering out, landing on the ground in gobbets of rancid ichor. The horrific stench of it was something every essence user recognised, having been through their own purges.

“Is he ranking up?” Hector asked.

“I don’t know,” Asya said, standing beside him. “Is that what ranking up to category three looks like?”

“No,” Hector said. “No, it is not.”

For Jason, the process rivalled the star seed implantation for pain to both body and soul, his mouth wide open in a silent scream. It felt like his body and soul were being torn apart and then woven back together. He staggered then fell to his hands and knees, mind consumed with nothing but pain. He forced himself back to his feet, defiant.

The onlookers saw three globes of energy inside of Jason's translucent body, circling each other behind his rib cage. One was a sphere of pure darkness while another was a glistening orb of blood. The third was a blue and orange eyeball that gave off a sense of depth and power, as if to probe too close with their magical senses was to risk annihilation on gaining its attention.

Jason's body once more started to take on a fleshy opacity. The crest of his back, which had vanished with his flesh, manifested within him before moving out as his skin once more lost its translucency. The light coming from his body slowly dimmed to nothing. It left him standing naked, surrounded by people pointing guns at him. Most of the ichor had been forcefully ejected, but enough was left to mar much of his skin with the unpleasant residue. The hair from all over his body had once again fallen out.

He was unsteady on his feet, stumbling and almost falling as he took a step. He felt profoundly different both to himself and the people around him. For him, it was like being connected to the universe around him, his magical and aura senses both massively enhanced. He even felt something odd that he suspected to be the dimensional membrane separating physical reality from the astral. The aperture that had once only appeared to his magical senses was plain to see for him now.

For the Network personnel with aura senses, Jason was a transformed being. His aura had always been powerful but now it felt like a solid object, as real as the ground beneath their feet.

He pulled one of his precious few vials of crystal wash and tipped it over his head., cleansing the ichor from his body. He ignored his nakedness and the gun-toting people all around him. Shade emerged from his shadow.

"Might I suggest some of Mr Tillman's pilatory unguent," Shade suggested. "Then, perhaps, some pants."

"Sure," Jason said, pulling out a tin of Jory's hair growth ointment. "Could you?"

"Of course," Shade said, taking the tin. He judiciously applied it to Jason's head and eyebrows while Jason recovered, feeling completely spent. Shade, unlike Jason, could use the ointment without worrying about hair growing out of his fingers.

Dark mist surrounded Jason, and when it disappeared, he was wearing his battle robes and Shade was trimming his unruly hair and bushy, alchemically-grown eyebrows. Hector strode over, Asya trailing behind.

“Mr Asano,” Hector said. “What exactly just happened?”

“Something I’ll explain later,” Jason said, then pulled out a recovery potion and swigged it. “After I deal with your rogue personnel.”

He marched over to the aperture and vanished into it.

\*\*\*

“Your Operations Director wasn’t kidding when she warned me he was a handful,” Hector told Ketevan in the camp’s commend tent.

“In fairness,” Asya said, “his friend has been kidnapped and it’s clear that she’s very important to him. Not to mention that the people behind all this fall under our umbrella. You think he cares about which branch they’re from or if they’ve gone rogue? From his perspective, the Network had kidnapped and tortured his friend, then kidnapped and tried to kill him. I’m not sure I’d be putting up with us if I were him.”

“He needs us,” Ketevan said.

“Does he?” Asya asked. “I don’t know what the World-Phoenix is but from what I could tell, it offered him a power I certainly don’t understand. With backing like that, even if he’s reluctant to accept it, what can he get from us that compares?”

A network functionary burst into the tent.

“Mr De Lange,” he said. “We’ve been interrogating the original aperture monitors, who are all Barbou’s people. They bolted after the dimensional space was sealed off but we managed to snag a few and we’ve gotten one of them to talk.”

“Why didn’t they go through with the others?” Hector asked.

“Some did, from what we can tell,” the functionary said. “The rest had various tasks to perform. One of which was providing a car when Barbou left the dimensional space from a different aperture, just prior to it being sealed. He was alone. No EOA, no prisoner. His people gave him a car and that was the last they saw of him.”

## Chapter 319

### Foiled Plans

The pair monitoring the aperture from inside the astral space weren't even iron-rankers. Two of Shade's bodies shot out from Jason's shadow as he emerged from the aperture and used mana-draining attacks, which knocked them unconscious as they had no mana to drain. Jason barely paid them attention as he conjured his starlight cloak and looked around.

The astral space seemed to be an interconnected collection of dilapidated manors and crumbling castles, rising up through an impenetrable fog. They were strung together like a spider's web by a network of bridges, none of which looked safe to walk on. Some were rotted wood, others stone arches, pockmarked by erosion. As for the buildings themselves, half or more of each structure had collapsed in sections, exposing the interiors.

The fog below completely shrouded the ground, if there even was one. Astral spaces obeyed their own rules and the fog might hide nothing but an endless drop into nothingness. The sky was dark and stormy, filling the air with drizzle. There was a wet chill in the air, the unpleasantness of which seemed to ignore Jason's bronze-rank resistance to extremes of temperature.

The aperture emerged into a room in a wooden manor. The exterior wall had collapsed, giving him a panoramic view of the surrounds, although enough roof remained to keep the drizzle off him. On the floor was a magic circle, the seal put in place on the aperture.

"This astral space seems well-suited to your combat style," Shade observed. "Complex environments full of dark corners."

Jason nodded. According to the Network intelligence, there were an unknown number of iron and bronze-rankers, plus ten or more of the EOA's elite converted.

"Are you going to unseal the aperture?" Shade asked and Jason spent a moment considering it.

"No," Jason decided. "A small army of Network jackboots doesn't advantage me. We're here for Farrah, not to bring in the EOA or the Network's rogue personnel. The element of surprise is more valuable than numbers if we don't share priorities."

"We scout the area, then?"

"Yes," Jason said. "Let's go find her."



Jason had reunited with the body Shade had sent to France some time ago, giving him access to six of Shade's incarnations. Five of them went out to explore the astral space, while the last remained with Jason, who set out himself.

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Things had started to go wrong in the astral space when Barbou quietly slipped away. At first it was thought something happened to him and a search was carried out, until they discovered that he had slipped away before the seals were in place. This had come as a surprise both to the EOA and the bulk of the traitorous Network personnel. They had aligned themselves with Barbou in the expectation that he would be leading them during their time inside the dimensional space.

The EOA realised that he had left after interrogating one of the pairs monitoring the seal. They were only iron-rankers and Barbou had not provided them with any direction beyond sealing the aperture behind him after he left.

In the wake of unified leadership, the remaining people split into influence factions to fill the power vacuum. The EOA and bronze-rank Network personnel united to cow the iron-rankers and the normals, many of whom wanted to leave the dimensional space and surrender to the Network. It was not a good start, given that the goal was to settle in for months, if not years before events outside brought the dimensional space into play.

Word started coming in that something had been spotted moving in the shadows, in more than one location. Since no one had been able to pin down whatever it was, it was assumed to be a stealth-type category two monster. Once they realised that there was more than one of them, they started sending out people to find and stop them. The direct manifestation of monsters in the dimensional space was a threat that would cost them to ignore.

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"It appears to be working," Shade said. "They've split into smaller search groups."

"Alright," Jason said. "Keep track of Farrah while I start thinning out the herd. Once she's isolated enough, let me know and I'll move in."

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They didn't see the shadowy arm move up from below the ledge. They only noticed something amiss as one of the category ones was pulled over the edge, plummeting down into the fog with a scream. One of his companions ran to the edge to look, even as the category two leader yelled out a warning. The reckless man was yanked off as well, following the first into the fog below.

The three remaining Network operatives clumped together in the middle of the room, eyeing the edge without approaching. They still maintained a watch on the other directions, guns at the ready, and immediately spotted a figure stepping into a doorway from which the door had long since rotted away. It was only vaguely humanoid in shape, wrapped in bloody, ragged cloth and they opened fire with their enchanted weapons immediately. The bullets hammered into the cloth but were absorbed to minimal effect.

They could sense the category two strength from the entity with their aura senses and as it moved into the room, the leader threw out a power. It was a concussive sphere of compressed air that struck the creature and blasted it apart, far more effectively than they had anticipated. Gobbets of flesh scattered all through the room, only for them to realise they were not the remains of a creature but a swarm of leeches. They now clung the walls, floor and ceiling on the side of the room that held the exits.

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Beams of blue and orange light, as if from some futuristic energy weapon cut down the normal and iron-rankers as they fled. Trailing behind them was a nebulous entity, the orbs floating around it being the source of the deadly beams. It barely shimmered at the occasional magic bullet passing through it as the fleeing victims desperately fired behind them in retreat.

\*\*\*

Four of the EOA's elite converted were moving through the remains of a once-vast castle. They discovered a strange entity stalking them through the shadows, only visible as what looked like a cluster of distant stars in the night sky.

The category two guns Barbou had given them had no effect. The bullets did not pass through the entity to strike the wall behind but stopped dead, silent until they fell harmlessly to the floor. The entity tracked them as they moved, disappearing from one shadow and appearing in the next.

"It won't come out of the dark," one of them said. "Just stay away from the shadows."

"Look around, genius. It's all god damn shadows."

"It's not even attacking," a third one said. "Maybe we should just ignore it."

"We're literally here to find whatever monster was snaking around in the shadows," the last one said. "Now that's done, how is ignoring the thing an appropriate next step?"

"Well shooting it didn't do anything," the third one said. "I'm not the one who assigned all the guys with vision tattoos in the other groups."

"So what do we do?" the second one said.

"Uh, guys? Where did it go?"

They looked around, realising that every shadow was empty. After the starlight entity had been dogging them so closely, its sudden absence was disconcerting. Then they heard a scream from nearby.

\*\*\*

The EOA member stumbled over the edge, plunging down with a scream.

“Bitch!” his companion said, swing a backhand blow at Farrah, who had just shouldered the man off the side of the building. Her hands were cuffed but she used her bound arms to intercept the strike and entangle his. She then slung him into a fireman’s carry and tossed him off the side after his fellow.

She had picked her moment well. They were leading her through what she assumed was an astral space, given the unusual environment. There were more precarious narrow spaces than not and she had played docile prisoner until one of them got sloppy and moved too close to an edge. She was now free, but the keys to her cuffs and manacles had gone over the edge with the two men

\*\*\*

A group of EOA and Network operative found each other, both having lost members. Many were still in the process of having their flesh blacken with rot.

“You have healers right?” one of the EOA asked.

“He took out the healers first.”

“He?”

“It had a man’s voice when it was chanting those creepy spells. It’s an essence user. Probably the one Barbou warned us about.”

“Essence user, nothing. It’s some kind of shadow monster.”

“Shadows don’t use huge scary knives. It looked like a sacrificial dagger and I’m not looking to be anyone’s sacrifice.”

“It’s just a guy. I’m sure I hit him with my barbed spear power. That must have hurt.”

“It did,” came a cold voice. There was a resonating quality to it that immediately arrested the attention and sent a chill down the spine.

“You’re Asano, aren’t you?” the man with the spear power asked. He was one of those marked with blackened flesh. “If we can make you bleed, we can make you die.”

“You wouldn’t be the first. *Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine on which to feast.*”

The man’s life force emerged from within his body as a red glow and a good portion of it streamed away to be devoured by the darkness. As it did, the man’s flesh was visibly dessicated.

“There!” one of them shouted, pointing in the direction of the stream of life force. Bullets and powers erupted in that direction, just as the draining power came to an end. A shadowy figure emerged from the other direction, dashing forward to bite into an exposed neck with an ornate black and red dagger.

\*\*\*

Farrah stopped and hid as she spotted a strange figure crossing the wooden bridge in her direction. It looked like a cloaked humanoid, but made entirely of manifested darkness.

“Miss Hurin,” a voice spoke. “I have been sent to assist you.”

Farrah stepped out from behind the half-shattered wall.

“Assist me how?”

The figure tossed a small object at her, but rather than catch it she dodged out of the way. What landed on the ground was a small key. Looking closer, it was crudely made, but conformed to the common design for a suppression collar skeleton key. She picked it up and pressed it to the collar at her neck, which clicked open.

She snatched it off and threw it over the edge of the building, where it fell away into the fog. She immediately felt the relief of magic flowing into her for the first time in what felt like years. Her mana stores had long dried up, leaving her with a constant pounding headache, but finally they started to replenish. She turned to the shadowy figure, which maintained a respectful distance, halfway across the bridge.

“My name is Shade. May I offer you a recovery potion?”

“You said you were sent to assist me,” she said warily.

“That is correct,” Shade said.

“Who sent you?”

\*\*\*

Outside the astral space, the ritualist team that had been examining the apertures were reporting to Hector. They were standing in front of the aperture Asano had entered while the logistics team was preparing to assemble another tent.

“We have no idea what Asano did,” the lead ritualist said. “It didn’t open the aperture for us, though. We’ve explored every option in our knowledge base and the simple fact is, those apertures are not going to open.”

The aperture suddenly opened, a dozen people pouring out of it, looking variously terrified, half dead or both. Moments later they were surrounded by guns pointed at their heads.

“We surrender. Just keep whatever you sent in there away from us!”

\*\*\*

On his way to the to Swiss border, Adrien Barbou stopped his car to use a wi-fi hotspot and logged into a private chat room. Soon after, a second person entered and sent a video chat invitation. He accepted and the face of a stern-faced woman appeared on his screen.

“Mrs West,” he said. “It’s done. My remaining Network contacts have informed me that they accessed the dimensional space faster than anticipated, but things have otherwise played out as you directed.”

“The outworlder, Asano?”

“Yes.”

“That works in our favour,” West said. “The more value he has for them, the more they will believe that our goal was to obtain the other outworlder. Once they believe they have foiled our plans, they won’t be looking for our true plot. You did maintain that the outworlder was our goal to everyone involved, yes?”

“Yes, Mrs West. No slip ups.”

“Good. You’ve done well, Adrien.”

“I’m surprised you were willing to sacrifice a team of elite converted,” Adrien said.

“The category twos will soon be out of date,” Mrs West said. “Anything below a category three is expendable for the plan. Now that your part with the Network is done, you’ll learn the rest once you arrive here. Your contact will meet you in Zurich, as arranged.”

“Thank you, Mrs West.”

\*\*\*

In a Los Angeles branch of the Network the Operations Director was standing by the window, her assistant, Cleary, standing next to her.

“Ma’am, we need to accelerate the recruitment of the outworlder. Once he’s acquired the other outworlder, Asano may turn his attention to Network activity. If he teaches the other branches how to accomplish non-core advancement, it will erode our advantage. Just having them know it’s possible is bad enough.”

“They always knew, Cleary. Most branches have someone determined to crack non-core advancement. It’s not like the process is hard to figure out. Physical training and meditation are hardly esoteric practices. They just lack the specific techniques to make those practices efficient.”

“Which Asano had already agreed to give them.”

“Which he won’t, because he’ll be joining us. Timing is everything, Cleary. He was never going to be responsive until the other outworlder was recovered. Now she has been, the time to take advantage has come. The Sydney branch has failed him and the Lyon branch has made an enemy of him. He is now primed to deal with the people who know what they’re doing.”

## Chapter 320

### Quite the Year

Farrah felt a freakishly strong aura from above and looked up to see a sight that stirred a strong memory. A man was slowly descending through the air using a cloak made of star-filled darkness. He landed lightly on the bridge, in front of the shadow creature. Aside from the cloak, he was wearing dark combat robes and a sword at his hip that she immediately recognised. He pushed back the hood and she saw a face both familiar and alien.

The shadow man, Shade, had said the man's name but she still had trouble believing, even as she looked right at him. The smug, perpetual half-smirk was the same, but was situated over an only slightly immodest chin. That chin had a scar, with another scar bisecting an eyebrow. The most startling physical feature was the eyes, which were silver and faintly glowing. Compared to the aura coming off the man, though, the eyes were perfectly mundane.

She had never felt a bronze-rank aura even close to that potent. It was domineering, indomitable and resolute, with an undercurrent she recognised with a shock as divine. There was the unmistakable feel of an essence user's aura, but also distinctly something else. Like the man's appearance, his aura was at once recognisable, yet also strange and new to her. It was solid in a way she had never felt from any other aura, as if it wasn't a projection of a soul but the soul itself, standing right in front of her.

"What are you?" she asked.

"What?" the man said. "Not even who? Wow, that's rough."

"You're not doing a great job of mimicking him," she said. "It's like you're going by vague description."

"Also harsh. You've missed a lot, Farrah."

"You're too tall," she said. "Your complexion is too clear. I'm not sure what the scars are about, but it takes a lot to scar an essence user. Your voice is too deep, I can't even describe how wrong the aura is and the eyes are way off. You couldn't even get the rank right. It's like you copied him but couldn't help making him more impressive than he really is."

"Well, this is just getting hurtful," he said and turned to Shade. "What's wrong with my eyes?"

"They changed when you took the power," Shade said. "I didn't mention it when it happened because there were other considerations."

"You couldn't have said something when you were doing my eyebrows."

"You were quite focused at the time."

"That's fair. Do they look good?"

"They set off your dark hair quite nicely. You really should grow the beard back in."

"I'll just let it come back on its own. I only have so much of Jory's hair cream."

"Hello?" asked the seemingly forgotten Farrah.

"Oh, you're the only one who gets to be rude?" he asked. "You know you died, right?"

"The memories are hazy, but yes," she said.

"I spoke at your memorial, you know. I was kind of amazing. Rufus said it was worth you dying just to hear my beautiful words. Gary blubbed like a little boy with a skinned knee. Snot got all in his fur, it was a huge mess."

"Is it really you?" she said.

He flashed a familiar grin.

"I knew my charisma would shine through."

"I can't imagine any shape-shifter with so little dignity as to talk that much crap," she said. "What about Colin?"

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As soon as Shade told him he found her, Jason had started rushing through the astral space, chaining shadow jumps to reach her as quickly as he could. He leapt off a castle rooftop, floating downwards as he saw her staring at Shade with suspicion. She sensed his aura and looked up, watching him like a stranger, even as he landed and revealed his face.

She was not looking her best, thin, dirty and hair reduced to a thin fuzz. At least they'd given her some clothes, some track pants and a t-shirt, but she was still barefoot. She looked at him with wary eyes.

"What are you?" she asked.

He realised that for all that she laid the groundwork for who he was, she had missed most of his transformative experiences. It was no surprise she looked at him like a stranger. His personal crest could not be falsified, but she had never seen it. His aura and even his rank were sun and moon to what she knew, let alone his appearance. The cloak of stars certainly helped, but if he was going to convince her he was himself, he needed to really be himself. He started talking.

He watched recognition and hope slowly dawn on her face as he bantered.

"What about Colin?" she asked.



He held up his hand, the palm growing slick with blood that coalesced into a leech with horrifying lamprey teeth.

“I don’t need to cut myself to pull him out, now,” Jason said. “The benefits of ranking up.”

She started at the leech in his hand, which rocked back and forth in a way that was somehow merry, despite coming from a tiny blood-sucking monster.

“I think he missed…”

She rocketed forward with peak bronze-rank speed, almost bowling him over as she threw her arms around him, gripping him like he was a security blanket. Colin was knocked away, deftly caught by Shade. Jason felt her whole body tremble as she sobbed into his shoulder.

“Oh, hey,” he said softly, gently placing his arms around her.

\*\*\*

After a bronze-rank spirit coin, a recovery potion, Jason’s third-last vial of crystal wash, most of his remaining hair ointment and a surprisingly proficient hair cut from Shade, Farrah was looking more like herself. Not exactly what he remembered, with the jeans, blouse and jacket, but a lot closer than her recollection of him.

Her own clothes were long gone. Her stone chest dimensional space was her human racial gift tied to her earth essence, which would have been empty anyway. Jason had removed its contents a year earlier.

Jason hadn’t had the presence of mind to prepare clothes for her. Shade had taken the initiative to procure the ensemble, leaving the appropriate cash in the till of the shop he took them from.

They sat on the edge of a brick rooftop, legs dangling off the side. She leaned against his arm, reassured by the physical contact.

“How long?” she asked.

“A year,” he said.

“It must have been quite the year,” she said.

“You have no idea. Luckily, we’ll have plenty of time for me to explain it all. Also, quite a lot of recordings.”

“You kept making those recordings for your family?”

“Oh, yeah. They’ve even started watching them.”

“How?”

“Oh, crap,” Jason said, realisation dawning. “Farrah, this astral space isn’t attached to your world. It’s attached to mine.”

“That was your world?”

“Yeah. You didn’t realise it was a different reality?”

“I was collared and spent almost every moment either unconscious or thrown in a hole,” she said. “So, you got home.”

“Yeah. Look, we should really get moving. There’ll be more time for explanations on the way home. We’re on the wrong side of the planet right now.”

Jason had experienced an oddly emotionless clarity in the moments after his own captivity, but when the emotions finally came, they crashed down like a tsunami. He wanted to get Farrah out of the astral space and past the inevitable Network attention before it all caught up to her. He suspected that Farrah was mentally stronger than him, but there was no avoiding the aftermath of the trauma she had suffered. In his case, it had been months before he came up for air.

He got to his feet and helped her to hers. They had only just set off when he sensed a large number of auras spreading out through the astral space, some of which he recognised.

“Looks like the bad guys unsealed the aperture that was securing this astral space,” he said. “We’re about to run into some people but they’re allies. I’ll get us past them as quick as I can.”

\*\*\*

The Network platoon’s tactical leader, Karen Espinoza, was leading the team through the astral space after the inhabitants unsealed it and rushed out. She paused at another cluster of corpses, these ones both desiccated and blackened with rot.

“What the hell kind of powers does this guy have?” her second asked. “Did he seriously do all this alone?”

“This environment is probably as good for him as it is bad for us,” Espinoza said. “The more extreme the location, the less effective orthodox tactics are. I’ve been advising massive expansions to our tactical doctrine for years, and I’m far from alone. We’re far too reliant on conventional, military-derived tactics. Hopefully Asano turning up will actually be a spur for change.”

“He’s only category two.”

“Yes. Imagine if we could all fight like him. Category three monsters can soak a lot of damage, even from category three bullets. He’s clearly more reliant on powers than weapons, which is what we need at the high end. Thus far we’ve basically been throwing money at the problem. We may as well be using gold bullets.”

They continued to clear the space around the aperture to secure their beachhead, as exploring the kilometres of space within would take considerable time. They encountered Asano as he was on his way back to the aperture, calling out ahead so as to avoid friendly fire.

“You found her,” Espinoza said. “That’s mission accomplished for you. Thanks for doing most of ours along the way.”

“I was in the neighbourhood,” Jason said.

“De Lange will want to debrief her,” Espinoza said.

“I don’t much care, to be honest,” Jason said. “She’s done being beholden to Network personnel.”

\*\*\*

Farrah’s eyes took in everything as Shade drove them through Lyon.

“The magical carriages here are better than the ones back home,” she said. “And they don’t use magic. You know, we all thought you were talking nonsense about your world and what could be done without magic.”

“Wait until you see the plane,” Jason said.

She turned to look at him.

“Can I use a power on you?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said.

“Don’t you want to know what it is before accepting?” she asked.

“It’s you,” Jason said. “I don’t need to.”

She looked at him in silence for a long time.

“You’ve changed,” she said. “You were so skittish back then. You hid it well but scratch the surface and there was the fear.”

“We have a mythic warrior here who uses his fear as a weapon, turning it on his enemies.”

“What kind of warrior?” Farrah asked.

“He’s this super-rich guy that dresses up like a bat and goes around punching the poor.”

“That sounds like a terrible myth.”

“He has special boomerangs.”

“I don’t see how that matters.”

“Well if you take this stance with Batman, I am not going to try explaining Zatanna’s pants situation.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Farrah said. “What a tragically familiar feeling.”

Jason grinned, inwardly crowing as he kept her from dwelling on her ordeal. He’d essentially blasted through the Network, demanding a plane from Hector before dramatically driving away in Shade. His goal was to lean into the strangeness of a world that was new to her to distract her at least until they were on the plane and she had time to sit with what she’d been through, and hopefully get some sleep.

“So, about that power,” she said.

“Go for it. Shade’s the one driving.”

“I’ve never used this before,” she said.

- 
- [Farrah Hurin] is attempting to use ability [Power Bond] on you.
  - [Power Bond] will enhance some of your abilities for the duration of the bond and give [Farrah Hurin] access to your knowledge. This is restricted to your knowledge of concepts external to yourself. This ability cannot read your thoughts or access your knowledge of yourself.
  - [Power Bond] can be rejected or ended at any time by you.
  - If you do not implicitly trust [Farrah Hurin], this ability will fail. Subconscious distrust will prevent this power from working.

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Jason was extremely curious about the new outworlder powers replacing Farrah’s human abilities but was wary of conversation drifting in a traumatic direction. He had his own strange new power to worry about, as well.

- 
- You have been affected by [Power Bond], connecting you to [Farrah Hurin]. You may end this connection at any time.

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“So, that power lets you gain knowledge?”

“Yes,” she said. “It should glean certain amounts of knowledge from someone, based on what they are thinking about, but not their actual thoughts.”

“How does it work?” Jason asked.

“I’m just going by instinct, here,” Farrah said. “I’m thinking back to when we met you and learned you were an outworlder. Rufus said that every outworlder gets a power that acts as a guide to their new world. I think this is mine, tapping into the knowledge of someone I trust and turning them into my guide. Try focusing your thoughts on a topic. Any topic, it doesn’t matter what.”

"I can do that," Jason said. He considered for a moment, thinking of common aspects of his world. Looked around, he picked cars. He started concentrating on the idea of cars and Farrah's eyes immediately went wide and she started jolting in her seat for a few seconds.

"Are you alright?" Jason asked as the fit passed.

"I am," she said although she looked exhausted.

"So, do you know about cars now?" he asked.

"I do," she said.

"Think you could drive one?"

"No," she said. "I think the ability operates similarly to a skill book, although I can't be sure, having never used one. The difference seems to be that a skill book gives specific and specialised knowledge, even skills, while this ability gives more of an overview. I understand what cars are and how they operate, more or less. There's a lot of peripheral information that didn't make sense to me, and won't until I get a lot more knowledge."

"There is a lot to learn," Jason said, concentrating again. Once more Farrah was jolted in her seat.

"That's exhausting," she said unsteadily. "I should be judicious in what I want to learn, because I can only do that so often."

"Agreed," Jason said. "Essentials first."

"Do you really consider Magnum P.I. to be essential?" Farrah asked. "I'm not even clear on what television is, exactly."

"Oh, it's essential," Jason said. "It's going to come up a lot."

\*\*\*

Farrah was astounded at the plane, promptly learning about them from Jason. It left him worried about his own rather sketchy understanding of aerodynamics. If she was going to be learning about his world from him, she might end up with some strange ideas.

Following her initial outburst of emotion when they first met, Farrah had shown almost no signs of distress over what she went through. This started to worry Jason as they boarded the private plane and took to the skies. It was just the two of them, plus the pilot, co-pilot and one attendant who had apparently been instructed to be as non-intrusive as possible. After the plane settled into its flight, Farrah took Jason's advice and went into the sleeping cabin.

Unguarded in her slumber, Jason felt the brutal nightmares through her aura.

## Chapter 321

### Full Houseboat

Jason had his own unfortunate experiences with how essence users dealt with extreme trauma following periods of captivity. In the time he had spent recovering, he had learned a lot from the priest of the Healer and Rufus' mother, Arabelle Remore. In the weeks he had spent receiving their care, they had elucidated how the response and recovery of essence users tended to go.

Essence users went through their own variation on shock, as compared to normal people whose souls had not been magically reinforced. Following the trauma, essence users gained a grace period where their minds were stabilised by their souls. It was a defence mechanism that gave them a chance to seize a critical moment and escape their circumstances.

The price of which was that once the grace period was passed, their souls would enter a recovery state. Their powers were negatively affected and their mental state crashed, leaving them both fragile and vulnerable. Jason had experienced this himself, and it was not long into the first leg of their return to Australia that Farrah experienced that crash for herself.

Jason knew that there was little he could do for her at the moment, other than keep her safe. He didn't disembark as the plane stopped to refuel, remaining outside the sleeping cabin like a loyal guard dog. Only once he got her somewhere that she truly felt secure would she set out on the long path to recovery.

What that would look like, Jason was unsure. He didn't have access to experienced professionals like Arabelle or Carlos, the priest of the Healer that had helped him. He snorted a laugh at the irony of him, of all people, being disappointed at the lack of a priest.

Jason didn't bother waiting for the flight to arrive, portalling directly off the plane with a blank-faced Farrah. The interior of the houseboat managed to rouse a reaction as she looked around at the white and sunset colours of the cloud-stuff. He could sense the presence of his sister and her family but didn't announce his presence as he arrived in an empty cabin.

"Cloud house?"

"Yep," Jason said. "I won Emir's little contest."

"You met Emir?"

"Sure did," Jason said. "We have a lot to catch up on. I'm sorry I won't be able to help you as well as Arabelle would."

“Rufus’ mother? How much did I miss?”

“I’d love to tell you all about it,” Jason said. “Let’s get you settled in a room and I’ll make us some...”

Jason’s phone had been lost in the plane explosion and after jetting across the world and back, he didn’t even know what time it was.

“...lunch,” he guessed, based on the day outside.

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Now that Farrah was secure, Jason's next concern was her recovery. Even if he could find a local trauma counsellor he could trust, the circumstances made it very tricky. Anyone who already knew about magic would still have a lot of catch-up to do and would come from one of the local magical powers. Jason didn't trust the Network or the Cabal to not view Farrah more as an opportunity than a victim, even if they did have the qualified staff.

Jason could find an unaffiliated specialist himself, but there was no way to help Farrah properly without inducting that person into the secrets of magic and alternate universes. That would cause problems with traumatising his new trauma counsellor and he needed someone who could help her with the culture shock.

In many ways, Jason himself was the best choice to help her as he had some relevant experiences, but that did not make him the equal of the people who had helped him through those experiences. He did not want to mess Farrah up more than she already was.

In the end, he decided to compromise. He would reach out to the Network and ask their healer, Gladys for potential options. First, he would need a new phone.

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“Uncle Jason!”

The moment Jason appeared in the houseboat’s galley, his niece apparently confused the concepts of hugging and rugby tackles as she launched herself in his direction. He stood solid as a wall as she crashed into him, ruffling her hair affectionately.

“Uncle Jason...” she complained., straightening it with her fingers. He chuckled as he looked to her mother making lunch. Ian walked in from outside, holding the book he was reading. Ian greeted him with a welcoming smile, while Erika was giving him a scolding look.

“You have a lot of explaining to do,” she told Jason. “Like what’s going on with those sunglasses.”

“Jet lag,” Jason lied. “I’ll tell you all about my trip later. You know, it’s sometimes eerie how much you look like Mum when you’re cranky.”

“You do kind of look like Nanna,” Emi said, examining her mother’s face.

Erika’s nostrils flared and her eyes went wide.

“Now you really look like Nanna,” Emi said as her father held laughter back with tightly pressed lips.

“Explanations will have to wait, a couple of days,” Jason said. “I promised the men in black I’d stopped randomly telling people stuff before they enter into a secrecy agreement.”

“Since when do you have any respect for authority?” Erika asked.

“I’m always conscientious and respectful,” he lied, moving around the kitchen counter to catch his sister in a hug. She didn’t return it, so as not to get food stains on his clothes from her hands as she mixed spices.

“Once Emi goes off to play with Shade,” he whispered to her.

“Suffice to say,” Jason said, “that a friend of mine was in need of help and I helped her.”

“This is a mysterious magic friend?” Erika asked.

“Yes, although that requires its own explanation. I’ll make sure you’re up to speed before she’s ready to start meeting people. She’s in a rough way, right now, so don’t expect her to pop out and say hi. I’d appreciate if you could knock some food up for her. She doesn’t, strictly speaking, need to eat, but she could use the comfort in comfort food.”

“She’s here?” Erika asked.

“It’s a she?” Ian asked as sat his book on the counter and Jason glanced at the cover.

“The Shipping News,” he read from the cover. “I didn’t like it.”

“No?” Ian said. “I’m quite enjoying it.”

“It’s a problem of expectations,” Jason said. “From what I saw people saying on the internet, I was anticipating more action.”

“You know, you left Mum, Kaito and Amy in quite an uproar,” Erika said as Jason washed his hands to assist Erika. “Letting them in on it and then running off to Europe.”

“I know I need to talk to them,” Jason said, “but I have my own priorities, right now.”

“They’re coming around this afternoon,” Erika said. “I could have warned you if you had a phone. Why do you not have a phone, again?”

“I left it on the plane,” Jason said as he started chopping vegetables. “You could have told Shade. Actually, Shade could have told me.”



"Your instructions were to respect their privacy and only inform you if their activities put them in danger," Shade's voice came from Erika's shadow.

"You know, I don't love the constant surveillance," Erika said.

"Non-negotiable," Jason said, the usual joviality in his voice displaced by a hard edge that made them all turn their heads at him, Erika and Ian then sharing a glance. Jason kept chopping vegetables, seeming not to notice.

"Your knife skills are coming along," Erika said, watching Jason's hands move in a blur.

"The advantage of superhuman reflexes."

"Uncle Jason," Emi said, "is it fun being a superhero? I bet it's lots of fun."

"I'm not a superhero, Moppet."

"You use the special powers you got in an alternate reality to protect people from danger while wearing an elaborate costume that hides your identity," Emi said.

"She's got you there," Ian said. "You even have a superhero name. You know they're still trying to figure out who the Starlight Rider is."

"That's not a good hero name," Jason complained. "It sounds like a B-story hero that got cancelled in the seventies once the publisher realised it was a gay allegory."

"Are we still going to have those people follow us around?" Emi asked.

"I'm not sure yet," Jason said. "While I'm here, I'm all the security you need. I'll probably be taking some trips, though, so we'll see. I was planning to sort a lot of that out this afternoon but someone set up an impromptu family reunion. I have things to do today."

"Yes," Erika said. "You do."

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Kaito and Amy pulled into the marina behind a woman with long, dark hair in a classic convertible.

"Is that Asya Karadeniz?" Amy asked.

"Yep," Kaito said. They pulled up just along from Asya as she was getting out of her car. She had a briefcase and an expensive, flattering pantsuit.

"Hello Asya," Kaito said, getting out of the car. "You're looking good."

"Oh, hello Kai, Ames," she greeted them, her eyes walking up and down Amy's outfit as a small smile crept onto her mouth. "It's been since the memorial, right?"

"Yeah," Kaito said.

"Why are you here?" Amy asked.

"Work stuff," she said. "I didn't realise you'd be here when Jason asked me to come. Besides, I never properly thanked him for saving my life the other day."

"Wait, what?" Kaito asked.

"Sorry, that's all classified, but maybe he'll tell you if you ask. Or maybe he won't; I don't know if he still tells you everything like he used to. I only heard what happened between you third-hand, although your marriage itself speaks volumes. Funny how things work out, isn't it? You even asked me out a few times, didn't you Kai? I'm going to go ahead, so I'll see you aboard."

They watched her set off down the dock.

"You asked her out?" Amy asked.

"What do you think she meant by Jason saving her life?" Kaito asked.

"Multiple times?"

"It was back in school," Kaito said. "It kind of threw me. I'd never been knocked back by a girl from a lower year before."

"How many lower year girls did you ask out, creeper?"

"She's seven months younger than me," Kaito said. "She's older than you."

"Oh, so you remember her birthday?"

"When did I ever not remember your birthday?" he asked.

"Fair enough," Amy said. "Don't think I didn't see you watching her sashay down the dock."

"How was that a sashay?" Kaito asked. "It was a saunter at most. Her shoes were too sensible for a proper sashay."

"She never wore heels," Amy said wistfully. "She was always an annoyingly elegant giraffe."

"You two didn't get along in school, did you?" Kaito asked.

"Not especially, no."

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Jason and Erika watched Ian and Emi roar off on a pair of black jet skis.

"I wanted to have a talk," Jason said, "but we only have a few moments. Kaito and Amy are here, along with the person I'd actually planned to meet this afternoon."

Erika went to the side of the houseboat to look around at the car park where Kaito and Amy were talking to an attractive Turkish woman in a business suit.

"Did Shade tell you they were here?"

"I sensed them. I have magic powers, remember?"

She moved back and brushed his arm, as if to reassure herself he was really there.

"You feel different somehow," she said.

“I am. Come around for a drink tonight and I’ll catch you up on everything. I need a favour.”

“Sure, but you have to do one for me.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Wally has been bugging me about getting you on the new show. We’re filming new episodes all week, down next to the surf club.”

“Fine,” he chuckled. “If you can herd the family away tomorrow so I can get some things sorted out, I’ll be there Monday.”

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Kaito and Amy stepped onto the houseboat just as an unfamiliar woman looking sleepy and with dishevelled hair stepped out of a cabin.

“Who are you?” she asked warily.

“I’m Amy, this is Kaito,” Amy said. “Who are you?”

She peered at them blearily.

“Wait, you’re the brother,” she said, pointing at Kaito before turning her finger on Amy. “Which would make you the one who...”

“Jason told you about us, then?” Kaito said.

“Yeah,” Farrah said. “Just to be clear, I’m on his side, so as far as I’m concerned, you can both jump overboard and drown each other.”

She wandered back into the cabin, the misty door sealing it off.

## Chapter 322

### A Wizard Did It

Amy and Kaito watched Farrah go back into her cabin.

“Do we know who that was?” Kaito asked. “She seemed kind of familiar.”

“It was hard to tell with the Japanese horror movie hair, but yeah.”

“Wait,” Kaito said. “What about that woman from Jason weird hologram recordings?

The one he said shoots lava.”

“I think you’re right,” Amy said. “What the hell has Jason got himself involved in?”

“Wasn’t she meant to be in another universe?”

“You realise how insane you sound, right?” Amy asked.

“Ames, I don’t know what’s happening. We went through a doorway that led to the other side of town. How do you explain that away?”

“That’s all I’ve been thinking about for days,” she said. “The problem is, every explanation I come up with seems less plausible than the last. If we’re talking about Jason setting up a wormhole generator in Erika’s bedroom, magic seems less ridiculous, somehow.”

“It’s past time that Jason gave us some answers.”

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The arrival of Jason’s mother had not worked to alleviate Jason’s stress. With everyone in the bar lounge, he strove to explain things thoroughly. The constant stream of questions kept derailing things until he held his head between his hands and let out a groan.

“Mum, the answer is the same as it has been for your last five questions: because magic. You want to know why? Because a wizard did it, that’s why. And that wizard is me! I’m the wizard. Magic is real and I have it. I’m a magic man.”

He conjured his sinister dagger of red crystal and black obsidian.

“See this?” he continued his rant. “This is my magic knife. Don’t touch it because it’ll kill you super dead. Why? Because it’s magic.”

He casually tossed the blade away and it vanished in the air. He then tossed his sunglasses aside in the same manner.

“My eyes turned silver yesterday. That’s just what my life is now. Can you guess why? No, you can’t because it was magic, which hours of explanation is apparently insufficient to drill it into your tiny frigging brains! Asya. Could you explain how I saved us

when someone detonated a bomb in our plane? Actually, let me: it was magic. And awesomeness. All of you look around. You're sitting in chairs made of clouds."

He gestured down with both hands and all the cloud furniture sank into the floor, dumping the occupants. Jason gestured up and the furniture returned, lifting the fallen people as it arose.

"This whole houseboat is A: magic, and B: not a houseboat. It's a big magic cloud that I keep in a bottle like it's a genie."

At this point, everyone was looking on with scared expressions as Jason continued to fly right off the handle. He gestured to his left and Shade emerged from his shadow.

"This is Shade. Some of you have met Shade. His dad is what happens to you after you die, which is especially relevant to me because I've died twice already. The second time I came back from the dead, I even brought a friend. I should be with her right now because she spent the last two weeks getting tortured, but instead, I'm here teaching Intro to Sorcery to people who think I've got nothing better to do than answer their questions about the nature of the bloody universe. Well, I do and I'm sorry about catching you up in all this, Asya. I didn't realise I'd be having quite so many guests when I asked the Network to send someone. I should just let my friends take care of them. This is Gordon."

Gordon manifested on Jason's right with a surge of Jason's aura that washed over the room like a wave.

"I'm not even sure what Gordon's deal is," Jason said, "except he loves Judy Garland and he's a reality assassin. I don't know what that means, exactly, but it sounds really scary once you start to learn about reality, which I have because I'm an interdimensional warlock ninja."

Jason held out his hand, which became wet as blood seeped through it. Everyone in the room recoiled as leeches started spilling out of his hand to pile up on the floor. Bloody rags emerged from the pile to start binding it into shape.

"This is Colin," Jason said. "He needs a moment to gather himself together. When a super god was trying to possess me, he's the one who had my back. He's been with me from almost the very start and he has two purposes in life: adorable little dances and devouring every living thing on a planet."

Jason threw his arms out to his sides.

"I try to be a good guy, but it turns out I'm really bad at it and kill a lot of people. I've been back less than three weeks and I don't know how many people I've put in the ground. Asya, do you have numbers on that?"

"Uh... somewhere between thirty and fifty is the estimate," she said.

“Those people had it coming,” Jason said. “Some of them really had it coming and the only thing I feel bad about is that I don’t feel bad about killing them. So here’s what’s going to happen now. Anyone who has questions can go to the media room and watch the recordings as much as they like. There’s about a hundred and fifty hours of them and no one gets to ask any more questions until they’ve watched them all. If anyone tries asking me questions before then, they’re getting a demonstration instead of an answer, and I showed you my portal ability instead of my other powers for a reason. You do not want a demonstration.”

Jason gestured and a portal arch rose from the floor, which he stepped through and vanished. His familiars followed, leaving a room of shell-shocked people staring at the arch, which remained in place. Erika was the first to recover, turning to Asya.

“So you and Jason went to school together?” she asked pleasantly.

“Um, yes,” Asya said.

“It’s nice to reconnect with old friends,” Erika said, her voice then taking on the same flinty tone as Jason’s. “Now tell me about the exploding plane.”

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Jason stepped out into his soul garden. The sky reflected the sunny day outside his spirit vault, a warm breeze carrying the scent of flowers. He was glad that the garden didn’t smell of blood and death, which he would have expected.

What it did smell like was Farrah. He knew that outworlders had a distinctive scent to them, which had been described as being like springtime, but it was hard to notice his own scent. It was only after catching her smell, once she was cleaned off, that he really experienced the fresh, clean scent for himself.

The garden had the same clean aroma, which combined with the unseasonal warmth to give the feel of a spring day. He took a deep, cleansing breath, something he hadn’t done in a long time, and let the stress wash out of him.

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The rear of the bottom deck had been lowered into the water to allow Ian and Emi to ride their jet skis directly onto it. The jet skis both burst into dark clouds that coalesced into the form of two of Shade’s bodies. One disappeared into Emi’s shadow, while the other vanished into the shadow of the upper deck. Ian and Emi were towelling themselves off when Erika came out, blatantly ogling her husband as he wiped down his wet body.

“Do it slower,” she said, a lecherous smile on her face. Ian started pulling the towel back and forth across his back to create what he mistakenly thought to be a sensuous look.

“Gross,” Emi said, wrinkling her nose at her parents making eyes at one another.

“Where’s Uncle Jason?”

“He got a bit frustrated with everyone,” Erika said. “I think we forgot while dealing with all the craziness he brought with him that he is dealing with his own stuff. He went through one of his arches but it won’t let anyone else in.”

“That must be his special place,” Emi said.

“Special place?” Erika asked, turning her attention from her husband.

“He told me about it,” Emi said. “It’s a place that’s not really real that only he can go to. I’m going to go have a look.”

Emi left her parents behind to go into the bar lounge, still wearing her swimsuit and rash shirt, with a towel slung over her shoulders. Ken had arrived with Kaito and Amy’s girls, the older of which, Hana, was telling her parents about her day with Poppy. It was a story with all the clinical accuracy one would expect from a four-year-old.

“...and then we ran under the sprinkler and a hippo came out.”

“A hippo,” Kaito said. “That must have been exciting.”

“No!” Hana said, stomping her foot. “She was a stupid hippo!”

Everyone was actively avoiding the darkness-filled obsidian arch with their eyes as if ignoring the weird magical thing in their midst could make it disappear. The only exceptions were baby Jace, who was straining her arms in its direction from within her mother’s firm grip, and Asya. Her eyes were locked thoughtfully on the arch as Emi wandered in. Emi didn’t recognise her, so immediately wandered over and stared at her.

“Who are you?” Emi asked.

Asya turned a curious gaze on Emi.

“I’m Asya. You must be Emi.”

“According to who?” Emi asked, voice filled with suspicion.

“I work for some people who’ve become very interested in your uncle. Also, you brought snacks out to our security people in their car. That was very nice of you.”

“They were healthy snacks, so it wasn’t that nice,” Emi said. “You’re one of the men in black? Aren’t you meant to try and blend into the background?”

“You think I don’t?” Asya asked.

“Oh, please,” Emi said. “No one wears an outfit that makes them look that good by accident. I like your shoes, though. They’re nice, but you can still run in them if you have to.”

“That’s the idea,” Asya said with a dry chuckle.

“Why are you here?” Emi asked.

"I was meant to be going over some points of an agreement with your uncle and my organisation, but I wandered into a family reunion."

"That was Mum," Emi said. "Nanna found out about all the magic stuff only for Uncle Jason to run off to Europe. She's been constantly pestering Mum ever since, plus she's figured out that Grandnanna was healed with magic."

"They sent me because I went to school with your uncles and Aunt Amy," Asya said. "I grew up in Castle Heads."

Emi narrowed her eyes at Asya.

"Did you make out with Uncle Kaito?"

"No, I did not," Asya said, affronted. "I was hoping Jason would have time for me today before I left," Asya said, "but I don't think things will be very productive today."

Emi turned to the archway.

"He's in there? It looks just like his teleport archways," she said.

"Have you ever gone through one?" Asya asked.

"Lots of times," Emi said. "Fourteen. I think that's a lot compared to most people, though."

"I've never travelled like that," Asya said wistfully.

"You haven't? Don't your secret magic people have a bunch of teleporters or something?"

"No," Asya said with a chuckle.

"Ask Uncle Jason. I'm sure he'll take you."

"What's it like?"

"Kind of like a theme park ride, except you get the whole ride in one second. You'll probably throw up the first time. And the second time."

"Did you?" Asya asked.

"Of course not," Emi said. "I'm not a scrub."

"Emi," Erika said with an admonishing tone as she walked into the bar lounge. "Leave Uncle Jason's friend alone, go shower off that saltwater and put on some clothes."

Emi glanced at the archway sitting dominant in the middle of the room before trotting off without another word. Erika moved closer to Asya, joining her in observing the arch.

"I always wondered how Jason ended up the way he is," Asya said absently. "After meeting your daughter, I'm starting to suspect that it's you."

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Farrah didn't have Jason's connection to the cloud house, so her senses were unable to penetrate the walls to see if his family were still around. She'd been sitting in a cloud



chair in a daze, aside from the curry Jason had delivered for lunch that had briefly roused her with its vibrant scents and startling, complex flavours.

She suddenly found herself restless and left through the exterior wall that shimmered as she passed through. Jason's cloud house was far smaller than Emir's palace but the basic functions were the same. Meandering slowly around the lower deck, she contrasted the exterior of the houseboat to the interior.

The inside was familiar to her, not just from knowing Emir but from a magical aesthetic. The exterior of the houseboat, like Jason's world itself, was a façade belying the magic it secretly held.

She leaned against the wall, feeling lost in so many ways. She finally understood what Jason had felt when they first met. Captured by people with poor intentions with no understanding of what was happening or why. He had done the rescuing in both cases, which irked her, although the thought drew a smile in spite of herself.

The world around her had felt alien, as if its very nature was to reject her. The zone of magical density created by the houseboat was comforting, feeling more like home. It was an impressive feature, like a giant, perpetually active mana lamp. Emir had always been reticent about letting her poke around but perhaps Jason would be more amenable.

She resumed her slow wander, the glass exterior of the houseboat darkened from the outside to prevent anyone from seeing in. One of the walls shimmered and a dripping wet, naked child passed through it, pointing a finger at her.

"You're dead. Well, obviously you're not dead, but you died. You are Farrah, right?"

"I am. And you're naked."

The child yelped and ducked back through the wall, returning moments later with a towel wrapped around her.

"How are you alive?" Emi asked.

"I..."

"You must have come back with Uncle Jason right?" Emi interrupted.

"Yes, I..."

"But he didn't know because you didn't arrive in the same place," Emi reasoned, against cutting off Farrah's response. "You're the friend he needed to help in France, which he must have only just found out about, which is why he rushed off all of a sudden."

"You don't really need me to answer, do you?"

"You must have been in trouble and then he found out and got super-intense, which I could tell even when he was talking through Shade."

"Shade?"

“Something really bad must have happened to you.”

Emi clasped Farrah in a fierce hug as Farrah looked down at the tiny dynamo before awkwardly patting her on the head.

“I’m guessing you’re Emi?” Farrah said.

“Uncle Jason told you about me?” Emi asked, still violently comforting Farrah.

“He did,” Farrah said. “I see now that he might not have been telling me as much as warning me.”

Emi’s towel came loose and dropped onto the deck.

## Chapter 323

### The King of Everyone

Jason's spirit vault had undergone considerable change, which he discovered on his first entry since accepting the World-Phoenix's power. Fusing the physical and spiritual aspects of his being had a considerable impact on his spiritual space.

The garden itself didn't occupy any more space, which seemed to be a function of rank, but it was much changed from his last visit. It was now a largely hanging garden, with flower-wreathed bamboo trellises hanging over long sections of flagstone paths. The design was dense but immaculate, allowing the sun passage through the various trellis coverings and open sky areas to create artworks of sunlight and flowers.

In the section of the garden where the flowers represented his blood essence abilities, red flowers covered walls running either side of narrow pathways of blood-red flagstone. Overhead, more red flowers made a canopy that only allowed in dappled sunlight, giving the overall impression of walking through an artery.

The area dedicated to his sin essence had starkly contrasted flower beds of black, red, white and gold. Archways of hanging flowers carved the light into hard segmentations of light and shadow.

The dark essence area was now underground, the pathway leading into a subterranean cave system. Luminescent fungus and white flowers that shone like moonlight covered the walls while the floor of the cave was covered in silver grass that apparently required no photosynthesis. Even with the glow of flowers and fungi, it was hard to see in the dark and irregular natural caverns. Even Jason's power to see through darkness was suppressed, although it started working when he concentrated on it. It was, after all, his soul and he was ultimately in control.

The doom essence area used medium-sized trees to create different levels of light throughout. The paths were simple grass trails between bushes and trees. Some of the bushes were explosions of red and orange that, under the light coming through the trees looked like a fire. Other places had tall, narrow hedges covered in gold, white and silver flowers. The unobstructed light shining on them gave them an appearance reminiscent of Jason's transcendent finishing attacks.

A creek now led into the garden from under one of the walls, winding through the various sections of the garden and crossed by a series of small bridges. In the doom section, the bridges were rustic wood. The sin area had bridges of marbled black and

white obsidian. In the blood section, the creek was only heard and not seen, adding to the sensation of being inside a living vein.

The creek ultimately dropped from a small waterfall to pool in an underground fairy grotto, the only part of the dark section open to the sky. Even the dimmer parts of that chamber were filled with a rainbow of luminescent fungus, giving it an ethereal beauty.

As far as Jason could tell, the creek represented a trickle of power sourced directly from the astral. He suspected it was the reason he hadn't needed to take a spirit coin to stave off the magic deficit of Earth during the long plane flight.

At the heart of the garden, the gazebo had not only been fully integrated into the garden but transformed into a sprawling pavilion complex, centred on a three-storey pagoda. The marbled obsidian was more white than black, compared to the dark stone of the gazebo, and overgrown with vines and flowers.

Exploring the pagoda, the ground floor was the storage space for his inventory items. To outside observation the bottom floor had walls, but the inside was a different story. Instead of walls, the interior was a platform situated in a starry void. The contents of his inventory floated nearby and beyond that spread out an infinite expanse of stars, galaxies and nebulae. It was like standing in the centre of the universe.

"Bigger on the inside," he muttered. "I suppose I am too, for that matter."

There were two exits, in the form of apertures that reminded Jason of his portal arches. One was the archway through which the garden outside could be seen. The other was a ring floating in the ceiling, situated over an elevating platform, which Jason rode up to the next floor.

The second and third floors of the pagoda were open to the air, much like the old gazebo. The second story was a sitting area, complete with furniture, while the third storey was a meditation room with a luxurious floor of white moss that rivalled his cloud house for softness. Heading back down, he paused in the sitting area and looked at the chairs.

"Why more than one chair?"

He considered the changes to his soul garden had gone through since arriving back home. Until he gained the spirit vault, it had been an unchanging place, aside from the expansion when he ranked up. These new and rapid alterations were obviously a reflection of the changes to his soul. What he needed was some quiet time to adjust and consolidate but there were too many claimants on his time.

With that thought, his mind turned once more to things the new garden had mercifully distracted him from. He was soon back to dwelling on the frustration of his outburst toward the family.

“Damn it,” he scolded himself, his hands wringing impotently at his sides.

“You have a lot to deal with,” Shade said. His familiars had been comfortingly following him around like apocalyptic ducklings. “Miss Hurin’s care, the Network, your family. The changes to the very nature of your being.”

“I know,” Jason said.

“The man who tried to kidnap you and is now at large,” Shade continued to list off, “the EOA, the World-Phoenix, the mysterious painter...”

“I said I know,” Jason snapped, then his whole body sagged. “I’m sorry, Shade. Without you, I wouldn’t have kept my head above water this long. You deserve the opposite of being yelled at. How about a raise?”

“You don’t pay me,” Shade said.

“Of course I do,” Jason said. “I’ve been giving the money to Gordon every week to pass along, haven’t I Gordon?”

Jason’s nebulous familiar gave no reaction.

“See?” Jason said.

“No one will blame you for getting overwhelmed,” Shade said.

“You don’t know my mother that well,” Jason said. “I can’t allow myself to unleash like that. What if I lose control of my aura and give someone an aneurism? It’s stronger than ever and I’m increasingly finding it getting off the leash when I become emotional. The whole reason I ducked in here was that I could feel myself losing what little remained of my cool. The power disparity means that I don’t get to be the one who can’t control himself.”

He groaned, running his hands over his face.

“Shade, I don’t know what to do. I don’t see a path where I can do all the things I need to do without my head popping like a pimple from stress.”

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Emi marched into the crowded bar lounge, dragging Farrah by the hand. After drying and putting on clothes, Emi had taken Farrah literally in hand and marched her into the bathroom of Emi’s cabin. She brushed out Farrah’s depression hair, returning her at least a semblance of the appearance she had in Jason’s recordings.

This allowed everyone who had seen the recordings to recognise her on her arrival in the bar lounge, leaving everyone but Asya startled by her arrival. This was double for Erika and Ian who, like Emi, had watched enough of them to learn Farrah’s fate. Asya had at least seen her when arranging Jason’s flight back to Australia.

Farrah’s gaze was drawn to Asya, whose iron-rank aura stood out amongst the normals. Farrah could feel the curiosity and nervousness of the woman, along with a faint

strain of fear and hostility. It wasn't that she viewed Farrah as a danger, but saw her as a more nebulous kind of threat. It wasn't something Farrah could unravel without knowing the woman and circumstances more.

"They've all seen Uncle Jason's recordings, so they all recognise you," Emi explained, ignoring the room's occupants as she pulled Farrah in the direction of the arch. "Not all of them know you're meant to be dead, though."

For her part, Farrah was arrested by the incongruous obsidian arch in the middle of the room. She had once found an identical one under a lake, the object of a mission her team had been sent on by Emir.

"How can this be here?" she whispered to herself.

"Oh, this?" Emi asked as they reached the arch. "Uncle Jason makes them."

"Farrah?" Erika asked, the first to gather her wits.

"That's my Mum," Emi explained.

"Jason's sister," Farrah said, turning to Erika. "He always spoke warmly of you."

"Erika Asano," she introduced herself. "Jason told us you were dead."

"I was," Farrah said.

"I thought you said we couldn't go in," Emi said to her mother. She was arm-deep in the shadow gate.

"It wasn't working for us," Erika said, reaching out herself. Her hand was stopped dead on reaching the darkness filling the arch.

"That's weird," Emi said. "Farrah, let's go find Uncle Jason."

Emi stepped through the arch, dragging Farrah through behind her. After they vanished, Asya stepped up next to Erika and likewise put her hand up against the darkness. It felt like cool, heavy crystal under her hand, completely unyielding.

"I don't suppose you can tell me what's going on?" Asya asked Erika.

"I think it might be better to watch Jason's recordings from while he was away," Erika said. "I don't think he'd mind you seeing them."

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Jason was continuing to explore his new, densely packed garden.

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "I believe that something unexpected is about to happen."

"Oh?"

- 
- [\[Emi Evans-Asano\]](#) has entered your [\[Spirit Vault\]](#).
  - [\[Farrah Hurin\]](#) has entered your [\[Spirit Vault\]](#).
- 

"What?" Jason exclaimed. "That shouldn't be possible."

He was suddenly reminded of the moment he accepted the blessing from the World-Phoenix. At the time, his only concern had been getting to Farrah and he had closed the text wall his interface produced without looking at it. He wondered if there was a message log and his interface promptly supplied one, allowing him to find the discarded message.

- 
- Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has amalgamated your body and soul into a state that is both physical and spiritual. This state has altered your [Spirit Vault] ability to be a physical space that others can enter.
  - Only those who implicitly trust you will be able to enter your spiritual vault. Anything short of complete trust will prevent them from entering. You may seal the vault against any or all individuals. It is not possible to break into the spiritual vault by anyone without existing access to your soul, such as through a star seed or divinely-granted essence ability.
  - Anyone in your spiritual vault is under your power. They cannot use abilities or affect anything within the vault, including you and each other, with limited exceptions.
  - You and your familiars can affect people within your vault in almost any way, except for violating their souls, although you can attack their souls. They may be protected from your influence through a connection to a foreign element in your soul, if present, such as a star seed or divinely-granted essence ability.
  - You can expel or trap anyone within your spiritual vault, although individuals with a significantly greater soul sense than you may be able to force their way out. Individuals may resist expulsion through a connection to a foreign element in your soul.

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“Damn.”

In his astral space, the normal rules of reality didn't apply and he controlled it all. He closed his eyes and the pavilion came into view, with Emi and Farrah looking around in surprise. Farrah looked much improved, the simple change of brushing her hair making a huge difference. She was still haggard but much more like her old self. That was a startling turnaround in just a day and one he didn't put much stock in. He knew that her ordeal wasn't something to simply brush off.

Jason vanished from where he was standing to appear in front of Emi and Farrah.

“Ladies,” he greeted. “I'm a little surprised to see you here.”

“What is this place?” Farrah asked as Emi goggled at Jason's teleportation.

“I've been in dimensional spaces created by essence abilities before,” Farrah said, “and this isn't that. My aura and magic senses aren't even working. Is this some spatial treasure the Order of the Reaper left behind?”

“No,” Jason said. “This is the inside of my soul.”

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Farrah said, then shrugged. “I suppose that’s never stopped you before.”

Jason threw her a grin.

“I see this one dug you out,” Jason said, ruffling Emi’s hair as she crankily pushed his hand away. “How are you doing?”

“Not the best I’ve ever been,” she admitted. “You?”

“I’m not going to complain, with everything you’ve just been through,” Jason said. “Who am I kidding? Of course I am, but that can wait. You have no idea how happy I am to have you here.”

“Can you show us around, Uncle Jason?” Emi asked.

“Sure, although this is quite new to me,” Jason said. “I’ve been experiencing a lot of changes lately. How about we take a look around together?”

Emi slipped her hand into Jason’s and the trio started walking around the garden.

“So, this is what your soul looks like,” Farrah said. “It’s oddly tranquil. I would have expected something a little more erratic.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Jason said. “I’m a beacon of peace and harmony.”

They wandered the garden, Jason and Farrah keeping the topics light due to Emi’s presence. He thought back to the description of why they had accessed his spirit vault. The realisation that they trusted him to that degree filled him with warmth, soothing the raw nerves that had led to him hauling off on his family.

Emi delighted at every new sight, Jason saving the best for last. He finished the garden tour at the fairy grotto, then took them into the bottom floor of the pagoda to look out into the universe.

“It might be more impressive if your boxer shorts weren’t floating past,” Farrah said. Jason made a downward gesture and his inventory items dropped out of sight.

“I really needed this,” he said, squeezing Emi’s hand. “Emi, can you go tell your Mum that I’ve calmed down and I’ll be out in a while?”

“Okay,” she said cheerily, skipping out of the pagoda. The archways for his familiars and the vault doorway were still present in the pavilion. Once she was gone, Jason let his true weariness be revealed on his face.

“Something to eat?” he offered Farrah.

“Is it actual food, or will I be nibbling on bits of your soul?”

“It’s food,” Jason said. “My personal storage space is wrapped up in here.”

They took the elevating platform up to the sitting area and settled into chairs that looked like bamboo but had the soft comfort of cloud furniture. The elevating platform



descended and a tray of sandwiches came sailing up through the hole, settling onto the table in front of them.

"I'm surprised you're out and about," Jason said. "If it were me, I'd be hiding in my room for weeks. I know, because that's what I did when it was me."

"I'm not you," Farrah said. "I want to take control back. Get productive, do some good. That's not so easy in a world you don't know."

"Tell me about it," Jason said. "It was bad enough in your world, only for me to come back and discover I never really knew my own."

"You know more than me," Farrah said. "I'll be relying on you to guide me through it."

"If you're looking for productive, I think I have something. Back in Greenstone, I liked to blow off steam by monster hunting. Vent some frustration and help people at the same time by clearing off the adventure boards. The monsters here appear in proto-astral spaces, which is why no one knows about it. There's some kind of planetwide detection array they use to find and eliminate the monsters before the proto-spaces shoot them out into the world."

"A planet-sized magical array? I'd love a look at that."

"We can probably swing it," Jason said. "I was meant to be meeting with a rep from the local Adventure Society equivalent today. She is out there, but my sister decided to invite my whole family around for a big group talk about magic being real."

"The iron-ranker," Farrah said.

"She can get us into some proto-spaces," Jason said. "I still need to sort out the details, though. My family kind of took over everything and I just lost it and started yelling at them. They wouldn't have understood much and believed even less."

"Let me guess," Farrah said. "You're sinking all this time and energy into getting them caught up on magic, making sure they're safe and understand what's happening."

"Something like that."

"Well, you need to stop," Farrah said. "Just because you came home with a pile of magic powers, that doesn't mean you're suddenly the king of everyone. There's only so far you can be responsible for and to your family. They have to make their own choices and you don't get to tell them what to do."

"My coming back into their lives has caused chaos and brought danger."

"Are you an idiot?" she asked. "Life is dangerous and you can't change that, no matter how much you twist yourself up in knots trying. Do you think you're the first adventurer to bring some weird crap back to hang around their family's necks? Every adventurer that comes up from nothing has some variation on this, and yes, your story has

some surprising turns, but so does everyone else's. You're a little weird, Jason, but you aren't that special."

"So what do I do?" he asked.

"The same thing everyone does. You essence your family up, train any of them that are worth a damn and send the rest monster cores every now and again. Beyond that, you have to let them be responsible for themselves or it all goes wrong. If you're too controlling, they get stifled and inevitably someone makes a stupid choice and betrays the family, be it on purpose or inadvertently."

"It's not that simple."

"Yes it is," she said, then poked him in the forehead. "That is where things keep getting complicated. You need to get out of your own way, magic up the family and let them loose to make their own mistakes, while you focus on what you need to do."

"I'm not even sure where to start," Jason said.

"I suggest with how we even ended up here," she said. "We're in the wrong damn universe."

## Chapter 324

### I Came Back to Show You Wonders

Shade informed the family members who were variously preparing dinner, looking after infants or watching recordings that Jason was about to emerge and they should gather in the bar lounge. As such, they were waiting for him when he stepped out, Farrah right behind him.

“Firstly, my previous statement about asking questions before watching all the recordings stands. Second, this is Farrah. You should all recognise her by now. Let me be plain in stating that she is family. Anyone who has a problem with that can get off my boat. Third, I need most of you to sod off, so you’re getting off the boat anyway. I have important stuff to do and can’t be dealing with you every bloody hour of every bloody day.”

Most of the occupants were herded off the boat by Shade, although Jason made sure to give his dad a hug first. Erika and her family were currently living onboard, so they stayed, along with Asya. Once peace descended on the houseboat, Jason, Asya, Farrah and Erika moved to the kitchen where Jason started assisting Erika's dinner preparations. Brother and sister side by side behind the counter, finding an old, easy familiarity.

“So,” Jason said to Asya. “Did Erika shake the story of my France trip out of you?”

“I didn’t do any shaking,” Erika said, only for Jason to give her a sideways look.

“There may have been some mild jostling,” she confessed. “What she told me was insane, though. Aeroplane bombs, kidnapping, secret societies. Did you really kill that many people?”

“Yeah,” Jason said grimly.

Erika nudged him with her arm.

“Are you okay, little brother?”

“I’m heading in that direction,” he said, with a glance at Farrah.

“And you were kidnapped?” Erika asked Farrah.

“Yes,” Farrah said. “Lucky for me, they didn’t have any of the magical torture techniques from our world. An essence user can withstand mundane techniques well enough if you’ve been trained to. Especially if they’re trying to break you down mentally instead of physically.”

“You never trained me like that,” Jason said.

“You wanted us to torture you?” Farrah asked.

“No, now that you say,” Jason said. “How did they catch you in the first place? You should have been able to take those guys apart.”

“When I woke up,” Farrah said, “my brain was telling me it had only been moments but my soul had a longer story to tell. That was disorienting, to say the least, and I wasn't thinking clearly. Plus, I was in a newly-formed body and I wasn't human anymore, so it all felt very strange. My old racial gifts were gone and I felt all these blessings ready to evolve my new outworlder ones. In the state I was in, I made what turned out to be a very bad choice.”

“You accepted them all at once,” Jason surmised.

“Exactly,” Farrah said. “I wasn't exactly in a sound state in the first place and six gift evolutions at the same time were too much and I passed out. “When I woke up I was collared and in a box.”

“I'm sorry about that,” Asya said. “They were rogue elements of my organisation.”

“That's okay,” Farrah said, to Jason's surprise. “I've seen churches and Adventure Society branches go rotten from the inside. So has Jason, for that matter. The mission doesn't stop being worth doing just because some of the people doing it go astray.”

“I appreciate that,” Asya said. “The Adventure Society are the people responsible for fighting monsters in your world?”

“That's right. I'd appreciate learning some more about how you do things here.”

Asya explained the nature of the Network, with Jason occasionally contributing to help translate concepts for Asya or Farrah to understand better.

“Asya is here to nail down an agreement for working with them, so I can get to the monster hunting,” Jason said. “I also agreed to teach some of their people the things that you, Gary and Rufus taught me. I'm assuming you'll want in as well.”

“Why don't you just join their organisation?” Farrah asked.

“The Network isn't as open to independent action as the Adventure Society,” Jason said. “They tell you what to do, how to do it and expect you to obey.”

“Why would anyone agree to that?” Farrah asked.

“Because they control essence distribution,” Jason said.

“Ah.”

“This is why I've been negotiating an agreement more in line with Adventure Society standards,” Jason said.

“I definitely want to be part of that, then, yes,” Farrah said. She shared a smile with Jason as they sensed the elation in Asya's aura. After all the trouble the Lyon branch went through to forcibly extract information from the two outworlders, she was going to close the deal on voluntary cooperation. If the Lyon branch hadn't been so paranoid about their secret astral space, things might have gone very differently.

“I was thinking that we could take a trip to Sydney tomorrow,” Jason said. “Finalise the details, take a look at who you want us to train, and where. Erika, I’d appreciate you helping Farrah to get some clothes.”

“That works for me,” Asya said. “The International and Sydney Steering Committees have essentially agreed to the current draft of the agreement and they empowered me to finalise the arrangements here unless you wanted to change things up. I daresay that the inclusion of Miss Hurin is large enough a revision to put it off, but I can’t imagine them being anything but happy.”

“They bloody well should be,” Jason said. “Farrah’s probably forgotten more than I’ll ever know about magic. So, we’ll meet you in Sydney tomorrow, Asya?”

“Actually, I’d like to travel with you, if I may. I’m staying with my parents for a little while in Castle Heads. The Network wants to maintain someone locally and I was the natural pick.”

“Do your parents know about magic? Jason asked.

“No, but I’ll have a wing of the house to myself, so privacy won’t be an issue.”

“Oh, just a spare wing they happened to have hanging off the side of the house,” Jason said. “We should probably take a look at the details of the revised agreement.”

The current state of the agreement was dominated by loot distribution. Jason was allowed to keep any personally looted items and received merit points for anything looted by others using his ability. He could trade in loot for more merit points or his merit points for any materials the international committee had access to.

“I like it,” Jason said. “This way, the Network gets the bulk of the items, which is what it needs, and I get a massive pool to select the items I need from. Who determines the merit value of goods?”

“We actually have a valuation system in place, for trading between branches,” Asya said. “America exports a lot of gun essences, for example, which is why we have so many amongst our members.”

“That seems fair,” Jason said.

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Dinner was a large affair, with Erika’s family, Farrah, Jason and Asya. Hiro and Taika came back, having been out scouting potential locations for his land investment. Hiro explained his plan of building an Asano family compound to the others over dinner.

“That’s a good idea,” Farrah said. “If you’re not going to go for combat abilities, you should get Jason to give you an essence set suited for wide-area arrays.”

“I don’t know what that is,” Hiro said.

“It’s long term or permanent magical installations,” Farrah said. “That’s my magic specialty, so I can teach you all about them.”

“Essences are the magic cubes that give you powers, right?” Hiro said. “Are yours suited to that kind of magic?”

“No,” Farrah said. “I have volcano powers.”

“I was envious of her powers from the outset,” Jason said. “She is seriously terrifying. It’s awesome and I haven’t even seen her fight flat knacker yet.”

“We haven’t really seen you fight, either,” Asya said to Jason. “All we have is the footage of you fighting the category three, and the magical recording of your fight with the hydra.”

“Hydra,” Emi said. “Like what Heracles fought?”

“Yep,” Jason said, wagging his eyebrows at her. “It was a river hydra, with poison breath and regenerating heads.”

“Did you cut the heads off and burn the stumps?” Emi asked. “You know that lolaus was the one who did that, right? He was Heracles’ nephew.”

“You can be my assistant, Emi,” Jason said.

“I bet I’m way better than stupid lolaus,” she sulked.

“What’s a category three?” Farrah asked.

“A silver-ranker,” Jason said. “He got the jump on me, but he wanted me alive and was Greenstone tier.”

“You beat a silver-ranker solo?”

“It was more of a no-score draw,” Jason said. “He knocked me out and left me with his lackeys while he went off to get healing.”

“What kind of idiot tries to take an affliction specialist alive?” Farrah asked. “You got kidnapped? Didn’t they collar you?”

Jason’s eyes moved in Asya’s direction.

“I’ll give you the details later,” he told Farrah.

“You live a crazy life, Jason,” Ian said. “Planes exploding, kidnapping, rolling gunfights with bikies. I don’t want my daughter put in that kind of danger.”

“I’m afraid the world will be facing that kind of danger, sooner or later,” Asya said. “My organisation is doing their best to hold back the tide, but magic is rising in our world. It’s reaching the point where we predict that containing all the monsters will become impossible sometime in the next decade. The truth is, we don’t contain most of them now.”

“You don’t?” Jason asked.

“The grid only extends over the landmasses,” Asya explained, “and the surface of the Earth is seventy percent water. Sea monsters are real and we’ve been covering them up for centuries. Also, every year we’re covering up more and more sightings of monsters that have spawned on the moon. The people who think the moon landing was faked aren’t even close to the real conspiracy.”

“Moon monsters?” Jason said. “That’s awesome. Is there a secret Network base on the dark side of the moon?”

“No,” Asya said. “Not that they’ve told me, anyway.”

“That’s disappointing.”

“And now we’re having a serious conversation about moon monsters,” Erika said.

“Jason, you were always a source of weirdness but this is getting out of hand.”

“Can I be your assistant when I get magic powers?” Emi asked.

“How old are you?” Farrah asked her.

“I’m twelve.”

“You still have a few years until you’ll get essences. Have you started her training yet, Jason?”

Emi’s eyes went wide as saucers as her head swivelled to look at Jason.

“Absolutely not,” Erika said.

“It wouldn’t be anything strenuous,” Jason said. “A little martial arts and some free running. Really, it would just be some good exercise.”

“Farrah,” Erika said, “didn’t you say that your training involved torture resistance?”

“We wouldn’t do that,” Farrah said. “We didn’t do it for Jason. We could tell that he was soft.”

“Hey…”

“Although he did turn out to be startlingly diligent for someone who seems like he’d give up almost immediately,” Farrah continued.

“Oh, come on.”

“Frivolous,” she carried on. “Flighty. The constant barrage of inane chatter.”

“This is just getting hurtful.”

“You meet him and think he’d fold like a camp chair,” Farrah said. “We have this friend, Rufus, though. He knew from the beginning that Jason had what it took.”

“Finally,” Jason said.

“Rufus is the sexy one, right?” Ian said, having seen Rufus in the recordings.

“Really Ian?” Jason asked.

“What?” Ian said. “I’m secure enough in my sexuality to acknowledge a beautiful man.”

“Every damn universe,” Jason muttered.

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Sunday morning still found the Evans-Asano family lodging in the houseboat. Erika had talked about going back to their home after Jason’s return but her husband, daughter and the idea of giving up cloud beds brought her around.

When Asya arrived for their day trip to Sydney, Jason, Ian and Emi were nowhere to be found. They managed to find Farrah, watching Jason’s recordings in the media room, but she didn’t know where they went.

“Shade,” Erika said. “Where are my brother and my suspiciously absent husband and daughter?”

“They’ve gone out.” Shade said.

“Out?”

“Yes, Mrs Asano.”

“I don’t suppose that you’d like to elaborate?”

“Correct,” Shade said. “I would not like to elaborate.”

“Meaning Jason is doing something dodgy and asked you to cover.”

“I prefer to think of it as maintaining security without compromising privacy.”

“Shade, if you don’t tell me where my daughter is right now, I’m going to have Asya and Farrah here teach me how to use magic and then shake the shadow out of you until you’re a pale, skinny white guy who I will then proceed to beat with a cricket bat.”

“That isn’t a plausible scenario, Mrs Asano.”

“You want to test me, shadow man? I don’t care who your dad is or what you’re made of because I will find something to shove my boot right up into.”

“Mrs Asano, you’re wearing deck sandals. Also, if you go to the rear deck, you will find your errant family members returning.”

The three women made the way to the rear of the houseboat and immediately spotted a trio of figures flying several metres above the water. The water below was being disturbed by the air apparently pushed out by heavy devices on their arms and backs. The three figures dropped down onto the deck, where the jet suits dissolved into darkness that disappeared into Emi, Ian and Jason’s shadows.

“What the actual hell is going on?” Erika asked.

“I don’t think there’s an actual…”



Jason was silenced by the death glare that came from his sister, grateful when it was turned on her husband.

“Emi found this video on the internet,” Ian said. “It was these mountain rescue guys in England using jets suits and we wondered if Shade could turn into something like that. It turns out he could.”

“You let our daughter go flying off in one of those things?”

“It was perfectly safe,” Ian said. “Shade took over when we were going to crash into the water or a tree or whatever. *If* we were going to. That totally didn’t happen.”

“You’re meant to be the responsible adult,” she told him, waving her arm at Jason and Emi. “It’s clearly never going to be these two.”

“Hey,” Jason said, then held up his hands in surrender as Erika turned her gaze back to him. She returned her glare to her husband.

“What were you thinking?” she asked.

“That jet suits are super sweet,” he whimpered honestly.

“And that justifies the danger you put our daughter in?”

“She wasn’t in any danger, Eri,” Jason said.

“You keep out of this,” Eri told him.

“No, Eri, I won’t,” Jason said. She open her mouth to bite back but something in his eyes stopped her cold. It wasn’t hostile but it was unflinching.

“In the care of me and Shade,” Jason continued, “Emi is safer in the middle of a gunfight than alone in the playground of her school. I’m done playing by Earth rules, Erika. Magic is real, magic is awesome and it’s the new reality you live in, like it or not. I know it seems strange and alien and dangerous but it’s the thing that will keep our family safe. You will never catch a disease that can’t be cured. You’ll never be permanently disabled in an accident. A hundred years from now, your family, your daughter, will be alive and well. When you’re sixty, you’ll look better than you did at thirty. If you want to give Emi a sibling at that point, you still can.”

He glanced at Farrah, who gave him an encouraging nod.

“It’s a time of miracles, big sister. I’ve been focused on the dangers but I came back to show you wonders. I got distracted and lost track of that somewhere along the way. I want you to trust me, Erika. Life is about to get amazing.”

## Chapter 325

### Mercy

“That’s a neat bit of work,” Farrah said, taking in the Network’s Sydney branch with her magical senses. Standing outside the building, she observed the magical array shielding the upper levels. “Whoever put this in place did a great job of working with the low magic area and interweaving low-level magical formations. You’d still need spirit coins to maintain it with the magical density this low, but it must be very efficient.”

“By necessity,” Asya said. “The Sydney branch doesn’t have its own source of spirit coins and is reliant on the International Committee. The astral space that the Lyon branch was hiding will be used to set up spirit coin farms, using records left behind centuries ago.”

“I can help you set those up,” Farrah said. “Not for free, mind you.”

“We were rather hoping that one of you would have some insight,” Asya said happily.

For the first time, Jason let himself be taken into the Network’s local headquarters, with himself, his sister, Asya and Farrah going through a conventional security sweep and being given visitor lanyards.

“This is an uncanny feeling,” Erika said. “The months I spent trying to find out what happened to you. The truth was more absurd than I could have imagined, and now I’m going into the belly of the beast.”

Jason grabbed her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. The elevator rapidly rose up through the building, Jason feeling it as they entered the area of the security arrays. Without Farrah’s expertise, he would still be hesitant about entering. Annabeth Tilden and Ketevan Arziani met them at the elevator as they reached the upper floors.

“Congratulations on the promotion, Anna,” Jason said after introductions were made.

Jason has already learned of the shifting circumstances in the Network’s Sydney branch. With the death of Keith and the disappearance of Miranda, two slots had opened on the eight-person Steering Committee. Anna, already in line for the promotion, was immediately stepped up. Her deputy, Ketevan, now occupied Annabeth’s former position as Director of Operations.

The second committee seat had been filled by someone transferred from the International Committee as an unofficial liaison. The Sydney branch’s access to the two outworlders was of eminent importance and granting the International Committee some access and influence opened up better access to resources.

“I just wanted to thank you again for saving my life,” Ketevan said to Jason. “If there’s ever anything I can do for you, please let me know.”

“Well,” Jason said, “I think my friend here would love a look at that grid of yours.”

“I wouldn’t mind meeting whoever set up the arrays here, too,” Farrah added.

“Easily done,” Ketevan said. “Our magical emplacements team normally don’t like to hear from the operations side but I’m certain they’ll be eager to pick your brain for otherworldly knowledge.”

“The intention was to finalise the agreement today,” Annabeth said, “but there’s been something of an issue.”

“Is this to do with me?” Farrah asked.

“Actually, no,” Annabeth said. “The IC and the Steering Committee had approved the final terms you worked out with Asya. The issue is that the Americans and the Chinese won’t let the agreement go through until they’ve had a chance to send representatives to meet with you both. They both have teams on route to Australia as we speak.”

“They want a chance to poach us for themselves before we make a deal with the International Committee?” Jason asked.

“That’s exactly the case,” Annabeth said unhappily.

“They have the pull to shut down the agreement until then?”

“Not in terms of codified authority,” Ketevan said. “The United States and Chinese branches are both more unified on a national level than most other regions of the world and they’ve used collective resources to incentivise high-value members into joining their branches. Add in that they’ve been doing it for a century and those two countries represent a massively disproportionate section of the magical materials supply. This is especially true of spirit coins since they spare no expense to recruit anyone with a looting power.”

“Those abilities are inevitably worth whatever it takes to recruit the people that have them,” Annabeth said. “You will be even more valuable, so you can anticipate a generous offer.”

“The International Committee would appreciate the chance to counter thereafter,” Asya said.

“That’s annoying,” Jason said. “I want to get this settled so we can get down to the business of training people up and taking monsters down.”

“What we can do today is get some of the legal issues out of the way,” Ketevan said. “Firstly, we’ve established a legal identity for you, Miss Hurin. We can take you through the details and give you the appropriate documentation today.”

“I need your help to exist?” Farrah asked, then looked to Jason. He nodded and they both leaned against the wall, to the confusion of the others. Farrah initiated her ability, gaining an understand of identity documentation from Jason.

“Okay, I understand,” she said.

“I don’t,” Erika said.

“Farrah has a power that lets her learn things that I already know.”

“Is that a special thing that the two of you have?” Asya asked.

“It requires a certain level of trust to work,” Farrah said. “Similar to entering Jason’s magical space. Since he’s the only person in this world that completely trusts me, he’s the only one it will work with here.”

“We’ll also have you sign secrecy agreements,” Ketevan said. “All of this will involve government officials. Miss Hurin’s documentation involves government bureaucracy, obviously, and the secrecy agreements are made in accordance with the Official Secrets and Unlawful Soundings section of the Crimes Act. Once that’s done, we’ll be free to tell you everything about magic without restriction since you will then be legally liable if you do the same.”

“This is the template we intend to use for your entire family,” Annabeth explained. “We suggest that once they’ve signed the agreement, we run them through the same structured information seminar we place new inductees to the Network through. It’s basically an eight-hour introduction to the magical world, and we have one tailored for the families of Network members. Once everyone has signed, we can set up a session.”

“I’d like that,” Erika said. “Jason has told us a lot but he’s been all over the shop with his explanations. Some structure would be appreciated.”

“It would be best if everyone else could sign up together,” Ketevan said. “Mr Asano did contact us to ask for a preliminary briefing just for you Mrs Asano.”

“You did?” Erika asked Jason.

“You’re going to be in charge of family wrangling,” Jason told her. “That works best if you’re ahead of the curve.”

“If you’re going to do a full seminar,” Asya said, “I might have my parents inducted as well. Since I’ll be staying with them for a while, it would be better to avoid any unfortunate surprises.”

“We’d also like to brief you, Mr Asano, on the fallout from events surrounding the France excursion,” Annabeth said.

“Well, how about we get the paperwork out of the way first,” Jason said. “Then Erika can take Farrah clothes shopping while you get me up to speed on the rest.”

“Oh, so you’re just going to send the women off clothes shopping while the important man does the important work?” Erika asked.

“Yep. Begone, woman.”

“You know sexism humour is tired and lazy, right?” Erika asked.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “I can take Farrah shopping; just give me back the money I budgeted.”

“Oh, you meant ‘begone woman’ ironically,” Erika said. “I just didn’t get it. That’s funny stuff.”

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The detainment suite in which Kylie Chen had been placed was more like a motel room than a prison cell. Aside from the lack of a window, it had a bed, fridge and bathroom. A chair to sit in and watch the decently sized television or play the attached game console. The television had access to various streaming services, but otherwise, there was no internet connection.

Kylie was far from in any mood to binge-watch a TV series. After discovering that she’d been used as part of a plan that killed several Network personnel – people she knew – she had been trapped in a prison of self-recrimination. She went through the events that brought her to this point over and over in her mind.

The Frenchman’s cell had been far less nice than hers, much closer to the prison model. It also had more secure magical protections, which she had unsealed using the instructions provided by the committeewoman.

Despite Miranda Ellis’ assurances, Kylie had been wary of the French prisoner. In most cases she withheld her prodigious senses, refraining from spying on people’s emotions. More than concerns about privacy, knowing the true emotions of the people around her had always been a disheartening experience. She did not hold back against the Frenchman, however.

Examining him as she read the packet Miranda had given her to pass along, she sensed the exact moment he resolved to kill her, escaping before he had the chance. Being category three, he had not anticipated her having the perceptual strength to read his emotions.

She had raised the alarm herself, knowing that she would be punished for her terrible mistake, but Miranda’s preparations had been thorough. The Frenchman was gone by the time security dealt with the impediments Miranda had put in place, although not without killing a few of them on his way out.

Since then, Kylie had been dwelling on the fact that if she’d read Miranda’s emotions, she might not have been taken in so easily. Miranda had apparently known of her aversion, as well as the fear of Asano that had driven her to accept Miranda’s plan so readily.

The door opened and she looked at it curiously, as it was off-schedule for her meals. When she saw the man that stepped through, her blood ran cold. Asano didn't move further into the room, standing just inside the door. Kylie jumped out of her seat, retreating to the opposite side of the room from Asano.

"Can I sit?" he asked with an awkward smile.

"If I say no, will you leave?" she asked.

"If that's what you want," he said. "I asked to see you after I was briefed on the recent excitement. My sister and my friend are out shopping and I had a little time, but if you don't want to speak to me, I'll go."

He waited, and when she didn't respond for a long time, he opened the door to leave.

"Wait," she said hesitantly and he turned his head back to look at her.

"You're sure?" he asked. She nodded and he closed the door again before moving into the room. He turned the seat around so that he could face her if she sat on the bed, moving it away a little to give her space. She didn't sit on the bed, instead retreating into the corner like a scared animal.

"Have they told you what happened since you turned yourself in?" he asked.

After her experiences with Miranda and the Frenchman, she did not hesitate to explore him with her senses and was startled by what she found. He felt profoundly different from the last time she had seen him. More than just a different person, he felt like a different kind of entity altogether. It was to the point that she suspected him of being an impostor, some kind of bizarre interrogation tactic. It didn't matter since she had already told them everything, whether they believed it or not.

Looking closer she felt something in his aura. It was an aspect of his aura she had noticed before that her instincts told her would be difficult, if not impossible to replicate. It was like an authentication mark on his soul, unchanging even when his soul underwent a grand transfiguration. The man sitting in front of her was Jason Asano, but transformed from the man she met less than a week earlier.

Once she believed it was him, she started realising the similarities, alongside the differences. His aura was still domineering and resolute, with dangerous and powerful undercurrents. More powerful than ever, it felt like a solid wall in front of her. Even her powerful senses were unable to penetrate it and grasp his emotional state.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"People had my friend and I had to become something new to get her back."

She didn't ask if he succeeded. She would never put herself in between that man and whatever it was he wanted and would pity anyone that did.

“Did the Frenchman come after you?” she asked. She still had some desperate hope that Miranda’s plan and her part of it was at least partially authentic and that she wasn’t just a fool and a traitor.

“No,” Jason said. “As best they’ve been able to figure, the person who convinced you to release him never intended to send him after me. That’s what you said the idea was, right?”

She nodded.

“Miranda Ellis and the man she released haven’t been heard from since,” Jason said. “Rather than send the man for a second round with me, she had a bomb placed on the Network plane carrying me to France. I lived, obviously, but eight Network personnel did not. The entire flight crew, most of the security team and one Steering Committee member.”

She flinched.

“I didn’t know,” she said. “They don’t tell me anything, in here.”

“Did you know that the Frenchman killed more Network personnel as he escaped?”

“They told me,” she said. “Is that why you’re here? To get revenge by telling me about all the people my mistake got killed.”

“You feel responsible for the people on the plane?”

“If I’d read her aura, I might have known that she was deceiving me.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because people can be vile inside their own heads.”

“Ah,” Jason said. “Your sensitivity must almost be akin to mind-reading, except you feel people’s baser instincts instead of their loftier thoughts. You get all our ugly urges without the higher ideals that keep us from savaging each other like animals. Or capitalists.”

“Not yours,” she said. “Your aura was already too strong, too controlled. All I caught was glimpses of your emotions. Now I get nothing but what you let people see. Your aura is unlike anything I’ve even seen.”

“That makes you all the more scared,” Jason realised. They both knew that her emotions were an open book to him.

“Why are you here?” she asked again.

“I’m not sure myself, to be honest. They told me about you and I felt compelled to see you. Realising how scared you were of me in that dimensional space shook me a little. Not as much as you, obviously. I’m not responsible for your decisions. I am, at least partially, though, the impetus that led you to where you are now.”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“We’re all responsible for our own choices,” he said. “Inevitably we make bad ones. Sometimes we pay for that and sometimes others pay for us. I’ve been thinking a lot about my own choices, lately. The people I’ve killed and the smaller number I’ve let live. Once you’ve done it enough, killing becomes easy, in the moment. Satisfying, even. Vanquishing your enemies can be intoxicating.”

He paused in recollection, Kylie only watching him and not speaking.

“I was on a job, early in my career,” he said. “It wasn’t much more than a year ago, although it feels like forever. There was a man that tried to kill me and I let him live. I was still doing that, then. This man went on to be a henchman for a local crime lord and rose up the ranks rather quickly, being an essence user. When the crime lord had me kidnapped, later, I don’t know if he was aware of my connection to the man.”

Jason got up and went to the fridge, opening it up and taking a bottle of water.

“Do you mind?” he asked. She shook her head.

“Thanks,” he said, returning to his seat.

“The Frenchman wasn’t the first silver-ranker to kidnap me,” Jason said. “Sorry, that’s a category three. I was category one back then, so I didn’t resist as well as I did the Frenchman. Of course, that time I was still kidnapped but I got my arse kicked first, so maybe there’s something to be said for going quietly.”

Jason shook his head.

“Anyway,” he continued, “I was quite thoroughly at the mercy of this crime lord, and he was not a man of mercy. In fact, he had a rather unpleasant device designed to not just torment my body but also my soul. Their plan was to hand both over to a... well, that doesn’t matter. Suffice to say, I was in a bad situation.”

He opened the bottle of water and took a sip.

“One of the people guarding the location I was held turned out to be the man whose life I’d once spared. He chose to run off and tell my friends where I was, in return for not executing him when I had every chance and right to do so. His sneaking off panicked the people holding me and they had a falling out, giving me the opportunity to escape. Otherwise, I never would have been able to endure what they put me through.”

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked.

“You got the Network’s people killed, so your fate is theirs to decide. I’ve asked Annabeth Tilden to be lenient with you, for what it’s worth. The choice to be merciful saved my life once and that’s a path I’d like to find my way back to. Maybe one day you’ll have the chance to make a better choice and help others, instead of hurt them.”



“That doesn’t help me,” she said.

“I didn’t come here to help you,” he said. “I had a sense that speaking to you might assist me in coalescing some thoughts that have been floating around in my head for a while.”

“Did it?”

“Does it matter?” Jason asked, getting up out of the seat. “As you said, it doesn’t help you.”

He returned the chair to the position he found it. Kylie had not moved from her place in the corner. He knocked on the door and it was opened from the outside. He paused as he was about to leave, turning his head back towards her, still in the corner.

“I’m sorry I derailed you quite so badly, Miss Chen,” he told her. “We can never see all the consequences of our actions. Something we’ve both learned the hard way, I suppose.”

In the corridor, Michael Aram was hurrying towards him as the security guard closed the door behind him.

“Mr Aram,” Jason said with a smile. “Good to see you well.”

“Anyone who saves my life can call me Mike,” Aram said. “We’ve just got a category three hit on the grid. Kete... Ms Arziani was wondering if you and your friend were interested in jumping in.”

## Chapter 326

### Ideal Circumstances

Jason ignored the sound and motion of the transport helicopter as he read from the book in his hands.

“Is that Pashto?” Aram asked loudly over the helicopter, peering at the open pages.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“You speak Pashto?”

“I speak everything,” Jason said. “Magic powers, you know?”

“Right. Why are you reading a book in Pashto?”

“It’s a favourite of mine. I finally get to read it in the original language.”

“What’s it about?”

“Imperialist foreign influences in nineteenth century Afghanistan.”

“Sounds like a real page-turner. The profile I read about you said you were all about terrible eighties pop-culture.”

“That’s in my profile?”

“We’re very thorough.”

“Then I imagine it included that I was, albeit briefly, a political science major in university.”

“That was in there,” Aram said. “You dropped out after one semester, right?”

“I wasn’t making great life choices in that particular stage of my life. I didn’t choose my major by picking it out of a hat, though. My interests go beyond Thundercats and the A-Team.”

“Glad to hear it,” Aram said. “The Network is laying a heavy bet on you. It’s a little worrying if the person we need to be a transformative influence is taking his own influences from the Transformers cartoon.”

“Oh, you can forget about the Transformers G1 stuff,” Jason said. “Pure nostalgia goggles. Transformers Prime is where it’s at. It’s a far superior series and has the best depiction of Starscream across the entire franchise.”

“You’re not filling me with confidence, Mr Asano.”

“You can call me Jason, Mike.”

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Jason and Farrah had been flown from Sydney to South Australia, with Michael Aram as an escort. The Sydney branch had negotiated with the Adelaide branch to let the pair accompany the tactical response team into the incursion and they were flown to a military

base in South Australia where they joined the response team in a series of transport helicopters.

Their destination was near the top end of the state, deep into central Australia. Scrubby flatland spread out for miles, red earth dotted by patches of yellow grass and pale green scrub. Nearing the astral space aperture, Jason encountered something unusual.

- 
- You have entered a region coterminous with a proto-astral space. You can enter the proto-astral space directly.
- 

Jason's new physical state came with new physical sensations. The world around him felt different, although he knew the difference was him. The wall between dimensions was thin enough that he could feel it. He ignored the sensation and didn't try crossing over, as that was a rabbit he wanted to keep in the hat.

As the response team's support unit's set up camp and prepared to open the invisible aperture, Farrah looked around at the landscape.

"This looks kind of like the western edge of the Greenstone Desert," Farrah said. She and Jason had passed through the fringes of that territory not long after Jason's arrival in the other world.

"Yep," Jason agreed. "Are you sure you're up for this?"

"I'm hungry for it," she said. "I might even try out some of these new abilities. I'm going to miss the old ones, though. Losing the personal space is rough. I would say it had all my stuff, but I think I saw some familiar-looking books floating around in your soul pagoda."

"When we cleared out your things," Jason said, "Gary and Rufus thought I should have your books. You were always trying to get me to study magical theory."

"Did you?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "I'm going with astral magic as my specialisation, for obvious reasons. Also, that's Clive's specialty, so he's taught me a lot. Rufus and Gary took the rest of your things, although I think they gave a lot of it to Padma."

"You met Padma?"

Padma was a young graduate of the Remore Academy that Farrah had taken under her wing. She had come to Greenstone with her team for Emir's competition, only to be shattered on hearing of her mentor's death. As someone Farrah had also mentored, Jason had felt a kinship with the younger adventurer.

"Your parents, too," Jason said. "They came to Greenstone with Rufus' parents."

"It feels unreal, talking about my memorial service."

“I got to watch mine,” Jason said. “One of my cousins recorded it on his phone, which seems a little tasteless. My Mum made the whole thing traditional Japanese, which I am not allowing the next time I die.”

Farah frowned as she thought of something, giving Jason an assessing look.

“If you have all my books,” she said, “Did you look at the one bound in black leather with a rose embossed on the cover?”

“I glanced at it,” Jason said. “I wasn’t sure what to do with it. I mean, it felt wrong to throw it away, but I wasn’t going to read your porn book.”

“It’s not porn. It’s sex magic.”

“I can’t tell if that’s better or worse.”

“Sex magic is worth learning. Aside from the obvious benefits, it’s quite multi-disciplinary. It touches on recovery magic, buff magic, aura manipulation. Specialisation is important in magic, but it pays to be at least a little grounded in other fields.”

“I have been dabbling in artifice a little,” Jason said. “I used a skill book so as not to soak up too much of my time.”

“They’re good to broaden the knowledge base,” Farrah said. “Don’t use them as an excuse to skimp out on theoretical studies, though.”

Aram waved at them as he approached, along with an Indigenous Australian man in paramilitary gear with a silver-rank aura.

“This is the Ditto, Tom Cotsworth,” Aram introduced. “Ditto means Director of Tactical Operations,” he explained to Farrah.

“G’day,” Cotsworth greeted.

“G’day,” Jason said, shaking the man’s hand. “I’m Jason Asano and this is Farrah Hurin. Do you prefer Ditto, Cotsworth, or Ditto Cotsworth?”

“Mate, if you can clean up the category threes and keep my people out of harm’s way, you can call me Susan for all I care. You two are the mysterious specialists who’ll be roaming about the country taking first crack at all the big ones, yeah?”

“That’s us,” Jason said.

“You’re confident that you can do it with just the two of you?”

“I think it’s more of a take turns situation, yeah?” Jason said, looking at Farrah.

“Don’t get dismissive,” Farrah admonished. “With a bad match up, a silver-rank monster could still take either of us down. Mostly you, but still.”

“I know,” Jason said. “But if they don’t push us at least a little, then what’s the point?”

“True,” Farrah acknowledged.

“So, how do you want to arrange us?” Jason asked Cotsworth. “It’s your show and we’re at your command.”

“We are?” Farrah asked.

“Within reason,” Jason told her. “They’re going to assume a certain amount of operational discretion on our part.”

“I can tell that you two are going to be a headache if I try and keep you on a leash,” Cotsworth said. “Since it was made very clear that your inclusion is mandatory and I’m to extend every courtesy, how about you two take point and show us how they do it in wherever the bloody hell they found you two?”

“That’s exactly what I want,” Farrah said “I could really stand to kill some things.”

“Bonza,” Cotsworth said. “That doesn’t sound at all like some lunatic powerhouse gearing up to plunge my life into chaos.”

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The inside of the astral space was indistinguishable from the outside, with the same, flat scrubland.

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➤ You have entered an unstable physical reality. Your presence will decrease the rate at which it will destabilise.

---

Jason ignored the message and looked around. It was almost entirely open ground, so the horde of monsters was not hard to find, some two or three kilometres off into the distance. Jason’s bronze-rank perception was more than enough to make them out clearly.

A tightly packed herd, they were grotesque mockeries of normal animals. There were horses with spider legs and mouths that split wide like a crocodile’s. Snakes, each with a mouth that ran along its back, the full length of its body. Lizards with three heads and no eyes. Floating over the herd as if swimming in the ocean were barb-tailed mantas.

Amongst the hundreds of animalistic monsters were several hulking creatures that stood three, four, even five metres high. There were giant, lumpen toads, and hairy humanoids that looked like sasquatches. One was a vaguely humanoid creature with bright red skin whose entire upper body was a bulbous cross between a toad and fish head.

“Looks like three gigantoads, two yowies and a yara-ma-yha-who,” Cotsworth said.

“Yowies” Jason said, looking at the sasquatch creatures. “No kidding.”

“No tricky powers, the yowies,” Cotsworth said. “Not real fast, either. It takes an awful lot of punishment to drop one, though, and if they hit you, you’re done. Proper done. Pulverised flesh scattered over a hundred metres of ground done.”

“I’ll take them, then,” Jason said. “What about the others?”

“The toads will shrug off little hits, but get a good enough whack to penetrate the skin and you can do some real damage. They’re not zippy but they can make a good-size jump, so make sure they don’t land on you. Aside from that, watch out for the poison spit. Big, awful gobbets of the stuff, about the size of a wheelbarrow load.”

“And that red thing?” Farrah asked.

“Yara-ma-yha-who,” Cotsworth said. “Not as tough as the others but it’s the worst of the bunch. It’s plenty strong and while it might look clumsy, it’s actually quite agile. It can also make some big jump attacks, with more precision than the toads, so watch out for that. The big danger is its tentacle fingers. They’ll latch onto you and suck out your blood like you’re a cherry smoothie.”

“I’ll take that one first,” Farrah said. “You want to start with the hairy ones and we split the toads?”

“Sounds good,” Jason said. “If you want to take the front, I’ll come in from the back. There’s bit of an army between us and them, though. I think we’ll be relying on the expertise of your people to thin out those numbers, Cotsworth.”

“Let me try something,” Farrah said. “They don’t seem to have noticed us, yet, so do you mind me getting their attention, Ditto?”

Cotsworth took a look at his teams forming up as they came through the aperture.

“We’re almost in and formed up,” he said. “Facing them as a horde like this, we’re going to set up for continual waves of fire, but we also like to make an early strike it mass horde scenarios. We have an area specialist who I’d like to put alongside you.”

“You’re the host,” Farrah said. “I would appreciate going first, though.”

“No worries,” Cotsworth said.

“Let me set up communication, first,” Jason said. “You’ve been briefed on this, Ditto?”

“Yep,” Cotsworth said. “I spoke with Koen Waters, my Sydney counterpart. He said good things, which is why I’m willing to be accommodating. He also told me not to keep you on the shelf.”

Jason sent out party invitations to the two platoons of Network personnel, which was one less than the Sydney team. While Cotsworth ran the sections through comm checks, he sent one of his silver-rankers to move forward with Farrah.

“I’m Farrah.”

“Melinda. Just Mel is fine.”

“What’s your approach?”

“Chains of fire spears. You?”

“Fire bolt chain.”

“Oh, classic,” Mel said. “You must have it up to category three, if you’re chaining.”

“Yeah,” Farrah confirmed.

“I thought you felt close to ranking-up from your aura. There’s a pair of category threes up in Darwin who’ve got fire bolt and it’s apparently something to see. It’s not often we get them all gathered up like this for big chains. You should start, because my spears do more damage if the targets are already burning. Normally I get the fire essence users in the ranks to spray things down first, then move in to sweep up. This should be much more convenient.”

“That works out nicely,” Farrah said.

The two women made an odd pair, both with the refined good looks of multiple rank-ups. Farrah was dressed casually wearing jeans and an open check shirt over a white tee, hair cinched back at the neck. Melinda had short-cropped hair and was covered neck down in what Jason continued to think of as death squad apparel. The black tactical armour worn by the Network’s silver-rankers was magical, although only bronze-rank gear.

“Time to try something new,” Farrah said as Jason moved forward to join them.

“Mind if I take a look?” Jason asked.

“Go ahead,” Farrah said and Jason pulled up her ability description through his party interface.

---

#### Ability: [Ghost Fire Mystic]

- Transfigured from [Outworlder] ability [Spiritual Flame].
- Create threads of ghostly flame. Flames are incorporeal and non-harmful to ordinary individuals but are highly effective against incorporeal entities. Threads can be used as a whip, rope, web or other cord-based objects.
- This ability gains an alternate function to draw magic diagrams, including ones that float in the air. Power-amplifying diagrams for fire abilities have increased effect when created with this ability.

---

Farrah drew a magic diagram in the air with her finger, reminding Jason of the many times he had seen Clive do the same. Instead of Clive’s golden light, though, Farrah drew in threads of red and yellow flame that glistened like liquid.

When she was done, she used an ability from her potent essence, Boost, which caused an amber light to shine from within her body. Boost was similar to the Bolster power that Neil possessed, in that it enhanced the next ability used. The key difference was that Boost only worked on the user.

Only after drawing out the ritual diagram and using her support ability did she hold up her hand and chant a quick spell.

*“Fire Bolt,”*

Fire Bolt was from a family of ultra-quick attack spells commonly possessed by spell casters and used as a basic attack. It could be fired as far as the eye could see and was very quick to use, but traditionally lacking in power. Stacking enhancement effects the way Farrah had done was common practice.

The ball of flame that shot out of Farrah’s hand was larger than what Jason had seen from other fire essence users, due to the Boost ability. Once it hit the ritual circle, the circle was consumed as the ball grew larger still, trailing flames like a comet as it shot low over the ground in the direction of the monster horde. It also changed colour, moving from orange through yellow to a bright yellow-white.

“That’s a strong one,” Mel said.

In the distance they heard the roar of monsters as the higher-ranked enemies sensed the approaching magical attack.

“My Fire Bolt ability has already gotten to silver,” Farrah said. “Even so, it should only kill the lowest-rank stuff outright. You want to follow on so you can chain off the weak ones while they’re still burning, Mel?”

Mel grinned, not bothering to respond. She raised her hand and chanted a spell.

*“Blazing Spear.”*

A spear that looked to be made of molten metal appeared in front of her and shot off after the fire bolt. It didn’t appear to have any concerns about gravity, flying in a perfectly flat trajectory.

The fire bolt reached the monsters first, landing on a spider-legged horse that let out an alien shriek as flames engulfed it, as if it had been covered in accelerant. New bolts of fire shot out from the burning monster at other nearby monsters, who suffered the same fate. Fire bolts then emerged from them, continuing to chain from creature to hideous creature as flames overtook the horde like a rising tide.

The blazing spear propagated in much the same way, striking a burning monster, around which more spears were conjured to spread out and out, chasing after the wave of fire bolts. The collaboration of the two basic attack spells, chaining over and over, was devastating to the weaker members of the horde.

“Uh...” Jason said, watching the carnage. The iron rankers amongst the horde were falling like raindrops, with the bronze-rankers mostly surviving but in such a wrecked state that the Network team with their firearms should have little trouble mopping up. The larger



monsters were burning, but they seemed largely unfazed. The fires on them soon went out, revealing some discoloured skin and scorched hair, but little more than superficial damage.

“Now for the finishing touch,” Farrah said. She held her hands out to her sides, palms up, slowly raising them as she chanted a spell.

*“Let the fires rise and claim their ashen due.”*

In the distance, the horde was a sea of flame emitting horrifying shrieks of agony, heard, even from so far away. With Farrah’s spell, the fire started burning brighter, the screams growing louder before starting to fall silent. Jason took another peek at her abilities.

“What spell was that?” Jason asked.

“Look for yourself,” Farrah said.

---

#### Ability: [Rising Flames] (Potent)

- Spell
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 3 minutes.
  
- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Damage dealt by all instances of [Burning] inflicted by you slowly increases.
  
- Effect (bronze): Shortly after an instance of [Burning] reaches maximum damage potential, it detonates, consuming the instance of [Burning] and dealing all potential damage immediately.
  
- Effect (silver): When instances of [Burning] detonate, they inflict damage in a small area around the victim.

---

“Strewth,” Cotsworth said, walking up to Jason as he looked into the distance, scratching his head. “Looks like the rest of us can knock off. Good luck with the big ones.”

Aside from a few bronze-rank monsters barely clinging to life, only the silver-rankers were left.

“You know,” Jason said to Farrah, “I have a power that, when you stab someone, makes the bleeding slightly worse. How is that fair?”

“Always with the complaining,” Farrah said. “The circumstances just happened to suit my abilities.”

“The circumstances being an army of monsters.”

“Exactly,” Farrah said. “You have your own ideal situations. Put three people in the dark and you’ll probably kill them. Eventually.”

“Oh, that’s hilarious,” Jason said as he was shrouded in dark mist. “At least my ideal circumstances can include having mana left four minutes into the fight.”

“Your fights take longer than four minutes?” Farrah asked. “Maybe your abilities are terrible.”

When the mist dispersed moments later, Jason’s casual outfit had been replaced with his combat robes, his starlight cloak already draped over him.

“Shade, if you would?” he asked.

Two of Shade’s bodies emerged from Jason’s shadow to take the form of robust dirt bikes, naturally all in black.

“I don’t know how to ride this,” Farrah said as Jason mounted up.

“Do not be concerned, Miss Hurin,” Shade said. “Straddle me firmly and I will take good care of you.”

“Shade,” Jason admonished. “Time and place.”

“Mr Asano, that level of innuendo is beneath you. Or, at the very least, it should be.”

“Fair point,” Jason said. “That was low humour and we need to focus on the job at hand. Farrah, go ahead and put Shade’s throbbing machine between your legs.”

“I’m feeling very uncomfortable,” Farrah said.

## Chapter 327

### The Blood and Death Guy

Three black, oversized dirt bikes roared across the red landscape. One had an uncertain-looking woman, another a shadow figure and the third a man in a robe trailing a cloak of darkness and starlight behind him like a comet's tail.

"Your vehicle forms aren't normally this loud," Jason shouted.

"I will remind you that I transform through your power," Shade said. "If any of the traits I take on are yobbish in nature, while I might be the one bearing it, you are the one responsible."

"Are you calling me a yobbo?"

"I've seen the maternal side of your family, Mr Asano. Your mother may try and hide it, but you come from bikes and beer stock."

"Wait, I like that side of my family."

He pumped a fist in the air.

"TEAM YOBBO!"

"What is wrong with you?" Farrah yelled at him.

"I'm a man of the land!"

Farrah shook her head, turning her attention back to not falling off her bike. The supernatural suspension of Shade's dirt bike form made it a minimally taxing endeavour but she still didn't trust the artificial mount. Even with magical assistance, the rough ground made for occasional sharp bumps.

"Couldn't you have turned into a heidel?" Farrah yelled at her bike.

"Mr Asano's power allows me to take forms appropriate to the environment," Shade said. "A heidel is out of the question in this world, but I could manage a camel."

"What's a camel?"

"It's like a horse's gangly, awkward cousin," Jason shouted from alongside her.

"What's a horse?"

They were drawing closer to the few surviving monsters. There was a candy red fish-toad with tentacle fingers, four giant toads, and a half-dozen of the looming, hairy yowies.

Farrah's bike slowed to a stop while Jason and the other dark rider swerved wide in the direction of the hairy giants. Shade turned from a bike to a cloud of darkness that disappeared into Farrah's shadow as she conjured a set of full body armour around her. It was made of glossy obsidian shards swept into wing shapes with a red glow shining from between the segments.

In her hands she conjured a giant, obsidian weapon that only vaguely resembled a sword. The double-edged blade was segmented like her armour, with sections of serrated obsidian teeth over a magma-red glow.

As the two remaining motorcycles swooped around the toads, one of the humungous creatures leapt in their direction. Despite having the size and mass of a quaint rural cottage, it hurtled itself through the air with alarming speed. It was on target to crash into Jason, whose bike exploded into darkness. The dark cloud engulfed him just before the creature landed and smothered it.

On the second motorcycle, Jason emerged from the shadowy rider, occupying its place as the rider vanished into his shadow. Taking control of the bike, he swerved it hard to circle the huge toad. It didn't move, sedentary outside of its ability to make repositioning leaps. Rather than move into the attack, it struck out via the bulging pustules all over its body, which burst explosively to spray pus over Jason.

- 
- You have been afflicted with [Congealing Toad Venom].
  - You have resisted [Congealing Toad Venom].
  - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
  - You have gained an instance of [Integrity].
- 

Resisting silver-rank poison was nothing new to Jason, with his ability to ignore rank disparity and his stacked resistance bonuses. That made the worst part of the attack the stench, which was akin to rotting whale blubber. It wasn't rainbow smoke bad, but it was enough that Jason had once cancelled a beach holiday over a similar aroma.

Not letting the bursting pustules bother him, Jason made a quick lap around the creature, his shadow arm stretching to score its skin with his dagger while he chanted spells. The dagger barely penetrated the coarse, damp skin, but Jason had never needed deep cuts. In the short time it took him to loop the toad and ride off in the direction of the yowies, he had locked in his full suite of afflictions.

"This mounted combat thing might really work out."

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Farrah was squaring off with her own leaping monster. The bright red fish-toad-humanoid abomination called a yara-ma-yha-who launched itself toward her. She didn't have the mobility of the bike or even the mobility of not being encased in stone armour, so she didn't dodge. Instead, two halves of an obsidian dome rose from the ground to close over her.

The three metre tall monster landed on the dome, the impact spreading spiderweb cracks across its surface. Perched on the dome, the monster immediately started hammering away with tentacle hands balled into fists. It clearly had the strength to smash through in short order, but the dome exploded outward, tossing the monster back and peppering it with obsidian shards that dug into its flesh, although not deeply.

From within the expanding cloud of obsidian fragments, Farrah pointed to a spot on the ground.

*“Flame of the earth, await the call.”*

The monster’s agility was incongruous with its awkward-looking physique, but it twisted in the air to land on its feet. Farrah, predicting its landing point, had used her spell to create a glowing sigil on the ground, right under its feet. She snapped her fingers, no mean feat in a stone gauntlet, and a magma geyser erupted from the ground. The force of the magma stream staggered the monster, the molten rock clinging to its body.

Farrah strode forward, three flaming orbs manifesting and floating over her head. They each shot fiery beams at the monster, which ceased scraping at the magma with its hands and rushed forward at her instead. Farrah stomped her foot as she moved and obsidian shards erupted from the ground in a curtain, adding to the fragments already embedded in the monster’s flesh.

The creature quickly moved aside, dodging much of the cloud of shards only to see another ability coming for it. Something underground was rapidly digging its way forward. The monster moved again but the burrowing thing changed tack to keep pursuing. Finally, the monster grabbed a huge rock like it weighed no more than dollhouse and hammered it down, trying to kill whatever was hidden in the ground.

After the rock slammed into the ground, it was broken apart as a two metre obsidian column smashed through it as it rose from the ground in front of the monster. The column then shattered, burying yet more shards in the monster as Farrah chanted a follow-up spell.

*“Children of the volcano, be reborn in fire.”*

All the shards of obsidian, almost a patina coating the front of the monster, suddenly turned into molten magma. The small globules of molten rock started merging together burning all the hotter with each addition.

The entire front side of the monster was turned to molten slag, catching fire and drizzling onto the ground like syrup to reveal the creature’s hideous innards. Even so, the monster did not die. Monsters may have lacked an essence user’s arsenal of powers, but

their resilience put all but the most indestructible essence users to shame. At silver rank, any monster took a lot of killing.

Farah didn't let up, approaching now with her sword. Swinging it in a wide, horizontal sweep, the segments of blade whipped away, strung along a cord of glowing magma. It wrapped around the monster twice, the serrated edge digging into flesh. It was especially vulnerable in its ruined front. The sword retracted, cutting into the monster like a saw as it shrank back to the hilt.

Even that didn't kill the monster, but the creature was no longer a threat, laying almost helpless on the ground.

"Time to try another new trick," Farrah said to herself and the sword in her hands transformed. Instead of a sword, it became an unwieldy saw blade on a heavy handle, the glowing hot edge spinning rapidly. Too awkward for a fight, it was just the thing for dismembering a monster already all but done.

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Physically tougher and stronger than the other monsters, the yowies were still less powerful, lacking the speed or special abilities to leverage that might. At silver-rank, strong and tough wasn't enough anymore, which was perfectly highlighted by an enemy like Jason.

Literally riding rings around them on his bike, he quickly loaded them up with afflictions before leaving them to percolate, heading after the remaining toads. He started with the one he had already gone to work on. Loaded up with afflictions that built up while Jason handled the yowies, the toad's flesh was already covered in ugly splotches of dead flesh. Jason's Punition spell delivered an immediate burst of necrosis for each affliction, which was enough to finish the toad off.

Farah was coming away from having killed the most dangerous monster and was eyeing off the two toads closest together.

Leaving them to her, Jason took the last one. Once again, he rode around the monster on his bike, shadow arm flicking out to land a pair of knife wounds. He had the arm emerge from his cloak, using his own hands to keep control of the bike as he rode it wildly over the uneven ground. This was more familiar to him than his fight against the bikies, having learned to ride dirt bikes on Uncle Robbo's farm as a boy.

The toads had thick skin, but as Cotsworth had told them, their insides were much more vulnerable. Jason's afflictions ravaged the toad's insides and he didn't wait long before switching to the second phase. After hitting it with his Punition spell, he used his

Feast of Absolution to drain the noxious afflictions. For each instance of curse, unholy affliction, poison and disease removed, three holy afflictions were left in its place.

Penance inflicted inescapable transcendent damage that diminished over time. Legacy of Sin made the target count as more damaged than they were for execute attacks, which only added to the fact that by the time Jason laid it on, the target was already plenty damaged.

Against lower-rank monsters, Jason had needed to work to use his finisher. Most monsters were done by the time he was ready to pull it out. Finally faced with silver-rank enemies, the power of the finisher was truly something he could use to close out a fight.

*"Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death."*

A column of transcendent light crashed down on the toad, descending like the judgement of the heavens.

---

#### Ability: [Verdict] (Doom)

- Spell (execute).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 3 (99%)
  
- Effect (iron): Deals a small amount of transcendent damage. As an execute effect, damage scales exponentially with the enemy's level of injury.
  
- Effect (bronze): Damage scaling is increased by instances of [Penance] on the target.

---

As of bronze rank, the triple-stack scaling of damage and the two afflictions made Jason's finisher a force of absolute annihilation, wiping the toad from existence.

- 
- You have defeated [Gigantoad].
  
  - [Gigantoad] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.
  
  - 8 gobbets of [Silver Toad Jelly] have been added to your inventory.
  - [Healing Unguent (Silver)] has been added to your inventory.
  - [Monster Core (Silver)] has been added to your inventory.
  - 10 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Since his Punition spell had a cooldown, it would take him a moment to go through each of the yowies he had left behind, so after felling the toad, he pointed a hand in their direction.

*“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”*

One of the yowies stumbled as clumps of hair started falling out of stricken flesh.

\*\*\*

Farrah didn't bother messing around with the last two toads, deciding to go all out. She started by drawing a fire diagram in the air and then activating a power. Amber light shone from her body, before turning silver as her aura went from bronze-rank to silver. Then she cast a spell.

*“Burning heart of the world, show your might.”*

The first toad had leapt at her while she was drawing the diagram, but she didn't dodge, raising an arm in its direction. A metre-wide stream of lava erupted at the toad, coring its weak insides like an apple after punching through its tough skin. Pus and jelly rained down on her as she pointed her hand at the second toad. Another burst of lava made short work of it.

Afterwards, she dismissed her armour. Lava Cannon was a mana-devouring spell at bronze-rank, but artificially raising it to silver with her Limit Break power made her mana drop off like a calving glacier. She stood bent over in a recovery position, hands on knees as Jason arrived on his bike. Seeing her covered in toad goo, he cast his cleansing spell.

*“Feed me your sins.”*

“How do even your healing powers sound evil?” she asked as Jason tossed her a recovery potion.

“I used it on the fourth toad,” Jason said. “That should tell you what you need to know.”

“I saw that big column of smiting power,” she said. “Was that transcendent damage?”

“That's my finisher,” Jason said.

“What happened to you being the blood and death guy?”

“I also offer absolution,” Jason said. “But absolution comes at a price.”

“I see you're still the melodrama guy,” she said, looking in the direction of the yowies.

“What about those ones?”

Jason glanced back and cast another Punition spell.

“I'll finish them once they get over here,” Jason said. “Let me just loot this lot, first.”

“You don't have any more crystal wash, do you?”

“I've got two left,” Jason said. “I figured I'd save them for rank-ups.”



“Good idea.”

Speaking of rank-ups, though, I’ve got that feeling…”

Amber light started shining out of his body.

“Didn’t even wait for me to meditate,” he said. “That ability was right on the cusp.”

- 
- Ability [Verdict] (Doom) has reached Bronze 3 (100%).
  - Ability [Verdict] (Doom) has reached Bronze 4 (00%).
  
  - All [Doom Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 4].
  - Linked attribute [Spirit] has increased from [Bronze 3] to [Bronze 4].
- 

Jason leaned forward on the bike, letting Shade support him through the disorientation

“Mid-fight rank up?” Farrah said. “It seems that you aren’t taking these monsters seriously or your soul wouldn’t be relaxed enough for that to happen.”

“The fight is basically over,” Jason said.

“Looks like your monsters feel the same way.”

Jason turned to take a closer look at the hairy monstrosities.

“Have they turned around?” he asked. “It’s hard to tell with all that hair and how slow they are.”

“I think they have,” Farrah said.

“Oh, come on,” Jason said. “Why would you run when you can’t actually run, you stupid monsters?”

He took off on his bike, leaving Farrah with Shade, who emerged from her shadow to take the form of a black horse with a white mane. It was sleek and beautiful, with hair so shiny Farrah could vaguely see her reflection in it.

“Now, this is more like it,” she said.

## Chapter 328

### A Lot of Anomalies

While Farrah and Jason fought the silver-rank monsters, Cotsworth looked on through the monitor displaying what the camera drone above the fight recorded. Although the transmission was occasionally spotty due to magical interference, he had a fairly clear vantage on what was taking place. Mel was standing next to him, likewise looking on.

"They certainly don't fight like us," she said. "Taking on multiple category threes is incredible. I can't imagine keeping up that kind of output over the long term, though."

"Hurin is probably exhausting herself quite quickly," Cotsworth observed. "She's well-suited to blitz-attacking the most powerful enemies but would fare worse in a general DE sweep. Asano is a different beast altogether. At a glance, he doesn't seem to be doing anything."

"Poison?" Mel posited. "He only ever makes two attacks against an enemy, which are presumably special attacks."

"I believe that affliction specialist is the term," Cotsworth said. "The Perth branch has one. It's hard to even notice that their abilities are taking effect, but they also shine against the most powerful enemies, although it does take longer to drop them. The advantage is that they are highly resource-efficient, which is presumably why we're seeing Asano move from one fight to the next, here."

"There's talk of new strategic approaches based on the way these two fight," Mel said. "Any truth to the rumours, sir?"

"I believe that is the idea. What do you think?"

"I don't see throwing out our existing approach," she said. "Her methods are too resource-intensive and he's too slow for a large scale sweep and clear. They are taking us to school on the big stuff, though. Developing some strike teams specialised in eliminating ADE targets could really do some work. To be honest, I don't see why it hasn't happened already."

"There's been a lot of push for it from the branches," Cotsworth said. "The International Committee has been pushing back, though. Threats of reduced resource allocation for branches employing what they call 'unnecessary high-risk' practices."

"That sounds like a load of crap."

"It is," Cotsworth said. "The IC doesn't like it any more than we do. It's the Chinese and the Americans threatening to withhold resources if the rest of the world doesn't play by their rules."

“Bunch of pricks,” Mel said. “They poach all the looters, then leverage them to hold it over the rest of us.”

“That’s why Asano represents a chance to make a change,” Cotsworth said. “Word is, the Sydney branch is willing to share him and his looting abilities with the rest of the country.”

Even as they spoke, the tactical teams were using their connection to Jason to clean up the loot from the army of dead monsters. They stuck to the periphery, making sure to stay clear of Jason, Farrah and the silver-rank monsters.

"These two can also provide specific tactical guidance," Cotsworth continued. "If we're trying to work up new strategies blind, it's not worth the backlash. If we can quickly and efficiently work up new approaches, though, suddenly it's a lot more viable."

“And what happens if the US or China swoops in and takes these two away?” Mel asked.

“Then we’re back where we started,” Cotsworth said. “At the beck and call of the superpowers.”

As they continued to watch the fight play out, the head of the support team approached.

“Ditto Cotsworth,” she said. “We’re getting some odd readings off the dimensional space.”

“Odd how?” Cotsworth asked.

“We’ve been observing the integrity of the space, as per normal. A dimensional space normally takes forty-three hours to break down, with a natural variance. When we first came in, our readings came back normal, but now our projections are off. It’s looking like this space might last as much as sixty hours, maybe a little over.”

“Explanation?”

"I only know of one-dimensional incursion phenomenon that has operated outside of the normal time frame," she said, looking into the distance at the ongoing fight. "I can't confirm that the change happened when they entered the astral space, but I can't rule it out, either. I will say that the Sydney branch didn't record anything like this the last time Asano entered a dimensional incursion space. It could be the other one or it could be unrelated."

“Alright,” Cotsworth said. “Just record everything so we can hand it off to...”

He trailed off as a blinding column of light appeared in the distance.

“Uh, sir,” Mel said. “I think I may have noticed the effect of his abilities.”

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“Eleven silver rank monster cores,” Jason listed as he lay the loot out on the table. “Thirty-one tubs of toad jelly, not sure what that’s for.”

“You put it in tubs?” Cotsworth said.

“It came that way,” Jason said. “We took our cut of the silver spirit coins and we’re keeping the lower rank ones we looted ourselves. I daresay the army of monsters will give you enough to be going on with. Three tins of healing ointment, that’s the good stuff, so save it for your category threes. Lucrative loot, from those toads. A spool of bark-thread hair from one of the yowies. The big red thing didn’t cough up anything too special, sadly.”

“We’ll make sure everything is tallied up,” Cotsworth said. “I understand you’ve got a preliminary arrangement with the International Committee about the harvest results.”

“It won’t be finalised until I tell the yanks and the Chinese to get on their bikes,” Jason said.

“You don’t anticipate being tempted away?” Cotsworth asked.

“I don’t see what they have to offer that I’m not already getting from the International Committee. Sure, they could offer me more of it but if I wanted more I would have negotiated harder. Maybe they have some big secrets they could bring me in on but that doesn’t sit well with me. At the end of the day, the job is to protect people from monsters and that means all the people. We have a lot to offer and the rising tide should raise all ships. From what I’ve heard, that isn’t the way the US and the Chinese will want to go.”

“I won’t lie, that’s exactly what a lot of us wanted to hear,” Cotsworth said.

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By the time the plane returned Jason and Farrah to Sydney it was late in the evening. Erika had refused the ride home offered by the Network in favour of a hastily-arranged induction briefing on magic. She had a lot of questions.

Jason portalled them back to Casselton Beach, with a ten-minute mid-way pause on the secluded beach he had been using as a discreet stopover point.

“Maybe you should have dropped us closer to the chip shop,” Erika said.

“I’m trying not to be too blatant about magic,” Jason said. “Any more.”

After returning to the houseboat, he set up a video call with the Network headquarters in Sydney.

“Gladys,” he greeted. “I’m sorry our meeting today got put off.”

“Getting interrupted by alien invasions from another dimension is something you get used to around here,” Gladys said.

They spoke for a while about Jason’s grandmother and her ongoing treatment, which was going well.

"I still wouldn't go dropping any bombs about magic being real quite yet," Gladys advised. "With her advanced stage of Alzheimer's, her grasp of reality was fragmentary at best. Give her time to adjust before letting her know that everything she knows about actual reality is wrong."

"Thank you for taking such good care with her treatment."

"Thank you for saving at least some of our people. I knew that Miranda was a sea skank but I didn't think she was bad enough to murder our own. Keith wasn't a bad young lad and he didn't deserve to go out like that."

"Any trace of her yet?" Jason asked.

"No, it's like she dropped off the face of the Earth. Anna said the Lyon branch is missing a portal user and we haven't caught that Sebastian guy's scent either. Best estimate is that they either have or still are portal hopping to whoever is behind it all."

"Any movement on figuring out who that is?"

"Still just postulation at this point," Gladys said. "Barbou sacrificed EOA and Network personnel. It could be some faction in either organisation, the Cabal or some smaller group looking to make a big play. Don't anticipate learning more until they make their next move."

"I really don't like that Barbou got away," Jason said. "I'm worried enough about Farrah without having the guy who tortured her still out there somewhere."

"She's the reason you wanted to meet with me, yes?" Gladys asked.

"Yeah."

"How is she doing?"

"To all appearances, like nothing happened," Jason said. "That just worries me all the more. As much as she might brush it off you don't go through something like that – for weeks – without it leaving an impact. I'm worried she's burying a psychological cancer that won't show itself until it metastasises."

"Well," Gladys said, "the first thing you need to do is put away your assumptions. Culture plays a huge role in our psychological makeup and she's from an entirely different world. We also don't know how much having magic affects the way we process trauma. The short-term effects seem positive, but the long-term implications remain a mystery because we don't have the research base yet. It could be that our minds just handle it better, or we may pay for those short-term protections down the road."

"So you're saying no one knows and there's nothing I can do."

"I'm saying don't push her to respond the way you think she should. Listen to what she tells you. Watch for what she shows you. Be there for her if and when she needs you."

And don't underestimate the power of shared experiences. You went through some stuff yourself, while you were on the other side, right?"

"Where did you hear that?"

"I didn't need anyone to tell me when you're running around like an angry thorn bush," she said. "Your friend isn't the only one in need of recovery. My recommendation is for you both to take things easy for a good long while. Springtime is coming to that nice little town of yours. Enjoy it."

He didn't respond, his mind churning over.

"I know it's not what you wanted to hear," Gladys said. "You want to be active and do something for your friend. Sometimes, the best thing you can do is step back and not make things worse."

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Lance Houseman entered the hotel room in Sydney where his assistant, Franklin, was waiting. Lance was a broad-shouldered man whose silver rank made him look thirty, while his true age was almost double that. Franklin was a slender, iron-rank, black man holding a computer tablet. Both men wore impeccable suits.

"Room's clean, sir," Franklin said. "The locals didn't try anything, magical or otherwise."

"They'd be stupid if they did," Lance said. "You've gone over the materials?"

"Yes, sir," Franklin said.

"Then let's take a seat and go over them. Did anything happen while we were in the air?"

"Asano worked with the tactical team of another branch. This time he brought the woman he liberated with him."

Franklin handed over a file as they sat down, side by side, in the large suite's comfortable armchairs.

"This is everything we have on her, which is, essentially, nothing. The most concrete thing we have is an analysis of her abilities, courtesy of a drone recording. I've put the raw footage and an analysed break down of it to your laptop but, in brief, she's a blitz attacker. Highly capable, extreme damage output. She seems to have an ability to ignore rank barriers as there was no noticeable damage impedance from the silver-rank monsters. That's possibly just a factor of the poor video source, however."

"She's another Trelawney, then."

"Initial assessment is that she's potentially more capable than Trelawney, although that assessment has received some pushback."

"Of course it has," Lance said. "Our people aren't used to not having the best there is, but this woman comes from a world where our best is the norm. Value assessment?"

"Our best guess is that she's very close to crossing the line to silver-rank. Tactically she would be an asset, but no more than any other top-flight silver. It's the knowledge she brought back from the other world that's valuable. Our assets inside the Sydney branch claim that Asano has asserted that her value in this regard is higher than his."

"And what about him?" Lance asked. "Did we finally get a look at his abilities?"

"Yes, sir, although not a good one. We believe he's an affliction specialist so his abilities have limited visual effect. Most of them, anyway."

"Oh?"

"His abilities appear to work in stages. Initially, his powers inflict a rapidly accelerating necrosis, which he puts in place before moving on to other combatants. Then he comes back and switches to attacks based around what we believe to be oblivion energy."

"He's wiping stuff out of existence?"

"Yes, sir. Allow me to show you a clip."

Franklin pulled up a video file on his tablet, showing a man on a motorcycle trailing a dark cloak of stars behind him as he circled some stricken-looking hairy giants. A huge column of light crashed down on the giants, one after another, wholly eradicating each one.

"That's a lot of oblivion energy, if that's really what it is," Lance said. "We're sure this guy is bronze-rank?"

"There are a lot of anomalies in that regard," Franklin said. "He also seems to ignore rank suppression, which is possibly due to items or a learned ability from the other world. We have no information on anything like that existing, but our knowledge of the other world is centuries out of date. It may well be a more recent development. The analysts think it's more likely a result of individual abilities, though. We do have one of our own who can do that, after all."

"What else?"

"His aura is highly anomalous. He did something we don't understand while he was in France that had a physiological effect similar to a rank-up. Since then, he appears different, magically. His aura was already reported to be significantly more powerful than his rank suggested and now it's something else entirely. It apparently still reads as bronze rank but with a strength that easily matches silver. One of our informants referred to it as feeling like..."

Franklin scrolled through his notes on the tablet.

“...being bludgeoned to death by the Ten Commandments,” he read.

“How colourful.”

“As best we can tell, he’s bronze-rank. With the unusual factors surrounding him and the borderline strength of the other outworlder, our analysts suggest treating them as silver, from a tactical perspective.”

“What do they make of Asano’s tactical value?”

“We don’t have a full handle of his abilities yet, but early assessment places his value at extremely high. High endurance, escalating damage, oblivion energy. He’s built for taking down ADEs. His high mobility and stealth capabilities are just sweeteners. The problem is his behavioural profile.”

“Oh?”

“He’s erratic. Rash. It’s hard to predict when he’ll fight versus when he’ll talk. He’s willing to accept extreme consequences for bold moves. Strongly anti-authoritarian. Even so, he’s made connections in the Network and the Cabal. He values friendship over alliances. He also appears to be suffering from post-traumatic stress we believe stems from an extended period in some kind of combat zone.”

“They think he’s been to war?”

“Or something like it,” Franklin said.

“What’s the suggested approach?”

"Personal benefits won't win him over," Franklin said. "He seems to value relationships, so offering benefits for the other outworlder and his family will be better received. It's all in the packet I left in your room. He doesn't respect politeness. Be honest, show strength. He'll respect that. Do not threaten him, however. He cannot be intimidated and he'll see it as a challenge."

“He sounds like a huge pain the ass.”

“That sums up his behavioural analysis, quite neatly, if more colloquially than the written report.”



## Chapter 329

### Pitch Meetings

The film crew set up next to the Surf Club, with a crowd of onlookers gathered around. The kitchen set was put out, with the fridge and oven hooked up.

“Today we have a special guest,” Erika said to the cameras. “As viewers of my previous program may remember, I would occasionally have my little brother on before his untimely passing. As it turns out, he faked his death in circumstances he is yet to adequately explain, so for the first time on Beachside Kitchen, please welcome my brother, Jason Asano.”

“What kind of introduction was that?” Jason asked, walking into shot.

“Well, if you’d like to explain to the viewers what you’ve been doing for a year and a half?”

“Time and place, Eri!”

“Then I hope you’ve got a better recipe than you do an explanation,” Erika said. “It’s dessert week on Beachside Kitchen and Jason will be helping me make a Russian honey cake. Before that, though, we’ve each picked out a simple dessert recipe that we’ll each be making. What do you have for us, little brother?”

“I’m going with a brioche frangipane apple pudding, how about you?”

“I thought I’d pay deference to the lovely warm spell we’re enjoying here in Casselton Beach by making a simple and summery key lime pie.”

“West Indian lime pie,” Jason corrected.

“Most people will know it as a key lime pie, Jason.”

“We’re in Australia, Eri, and in Australia they’re called West Indian limes, not key limes. Ergo, West Indian lime pie.”

“Ergo? Are you trying to make the viewers hate you? Key lime pie is universally acknowledged as a delicious summer dessert, while the internet will tell you that West Indian lime pie is a gross sex thing.”

“It’s the internet, Eri. Everything is a gross sex thing,” Jason said, pulling out his phone. “You probably made that up anyway, so I’m going to look it up.”

His expression froze for a moment, then he put his phone away and flashed the camera a big smile.

“So today, Erika will be making a delicious key lime pie...”

Out of shot, standing next to the executive producer, Taika leaned over to whisper a question.

“You don’t put the bickering in the show, do you?”

“We edit it back for the airing,” Wally said, “but we do a special cut for the website. It’s a massive traffic driver every time he’s on. The audience love them together. I’d have him co-host if he’d just agree to it. Selling stationary and he doesn’t want to be a TV star. I don’t suppose you could try talking him into it?”

“I don’t think so, bro. He doesn’t sell office supplies anymore.”

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Several hours later, Jason was dealing with a group of stern Chinese men who did not look like big Beachside Kitchen fans. The man at the front was the leader of the group and one of only two that had spoken during the meeting. The only flower among the rocks was being the leader’s beautiful, young-seeming daughter, wearing the same sharp suit and sharp expression as the rest.

“You are a fool to reject our entreaties, Mr Asano,” he said.

“I was already a fool, Mr Li, so it wasn’t out of my way.”

A smile teased the corner of his daughter’s lips but she quickly schooled her expression. They were standing in the conference lobby of Castle Head’s largest business resort, although the only other one was just marginally smaller. Li and his daughter were both silver-rankers, while their unspeaking flunkies were all iron.

“You will come to regret being so flippant,” The elder Li said and marched away. The flunkies followed in lock-step, but his daughter remained behind.

“I always do,” Jason confided in her. “Actually, that’s a lie; I thought it would sound cool. To be honest, I’m killing it.”

“You are an unconventional man, Mr Asano,” the younger Li said. “Although we have not come to an agreement today, I hope you will consider yourself open to perhaps a more modest collaboration in the future.”

“Modest isn’t really my thing, but I’ll try and be open-minded. You know, I respect the approach you’re taking. You figured out that you didn’t have anything that would swing me, so your Dad comes in all bluster, making me feel powerful in rejecting him. Then you step in, reasonable, graceful and measured, to keep the door open.”

She gave him a wry smile.

“Did it work?” she asked.

“Definitely,” Jason said with a grin. “I’d give you my phone number but something tells me you already have it. How about you give me yours?”

She gave him a sunbeam smile and handed him a business card with both hands. Jason looked it over, seeing her work numbers on the front. He chuckled as he turned it over and saw another number, hand-written in pen and labelled 'personal.'

"Is your dad really like that, or was it a show for my benefit?"

"This approach was his design," she admitted, "although he was playing to his strengths."

"I think you both were," Jason said.

"And what do you think my strengths are, Mr Asano?"

"Most things, from what I can tell. Not blending in, though. I have trouble imagining a crowd where you don't stand out."

"Daughter!" her father barked from the lobby entrance. "We are leaving!"

"I have to go, Mr Asano."

"I am genuinely disappointed, Miss Li. I look forward to seeing you again."

As the Beijing Network delegation left, Jason wandered over to one of the lobby couches and crashed down.

"Strewth, that was a good plan." Jason said. "I think they may have sent the most beautiful woman in China."

"She is silver-rank, Mr Asano," Shade pointed out. "She most likely heard what you just said."

"Oh, you're right," Jason said. "Whatever will I do now she's heard me call her the most beautiful woman in China."

"Ah, you intended her to hear. I may have spoiled your intentions by drawing attention to it."

"No, I expected you to point that out."

"Then why say it?"

"Because she doesn't need me to tell her how gorgeous she is. But this way I get to do it while demonstrating that I thought things through this far, knowing that she's listening to us right now."

"Aren't you concerned she might see you as smug?"

"I am smug, Shade. I find it best to put that right out there, given it's a core character trait."

"When will you let her know about the melodrama?"

"Ideally while I'm rescuing her as she's falling off a building."

"She's a silver-ranker, Mr Asano. I imagine she would rescue herself."

“That does make it tricky,” Jason agreed. “How hard would it be to arrange another rolling motorcycle shootout?”

“I believe events of that nature are best left to occur organically,” Shade said.

“How often does something like that happen organically?” Jason asked.

“Well, Mr Asano,” Shade said, “how has your week been so far?”

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“I was hoping we could meet on your remarkable houseboat,” Lance Houseman said in a neutral accent. It reminded Jason a little of Farrah, whose translation ability made her English somewhat flat. Not everyone had Jason’s aptitude for forcing some local flavour through the sieve of a magical translation.

The American’s accent was not the result of a translation power, however. It was the classic mid-Atlantic banality, designed not to offend anyone yet slightly annoying everyone. Or perhaps that was the work of the smug self-confidence, Jason considered. He wondered, for a moment, if that was how people saw him, then dismissed the thought.

They were sitting in a Castle Heads café, the American with a long black and Jason with an iced chocolate, piled high with cream. Houseman had chosen to meet him alone.

“Your people have been examining my houseboat for days,” Jason said. “You should ask them.”

“That wasn’t us,” Lance said. “You might want to look to the Chinese for that.”

“You just lied to me, Mr Houseman,” Jason said. “Not a great start.”

Jason sipped at his ice chocolate, getting whipped cream on his nose but seeming not to notice. The American’s attention was drawn to it, distracted, but he didn’t say anything.

“Why don’t we get straight to the point,” Lance said. “My understanding is that you’re not a man to beat around the bush.”

“And you’re not a man to act incautiously,” Jason said. “All those category threes lurking around. Do you really think I’m that dangerous?”

“If you weren’t, you wouldn’t be worth my time, Mr Asano.”

“Sure I would,” Jason said. “I could be a bumbling fool and you’d be here, so long as I was a bumbling fool with a looting power. Even if that’s the only worthwhile thing I picked up over there, that’s money in the bank.”

“I don’t think you want money, Mr Asano. We can offer you more than the locals, no question, but you don’t care because you don’t need it. You’re waiting to hear what we can give you that they can’t.”

“Actually, I’m waiting for you to leave. I made a deal that I can’t close because you and your people are obnoxious enough to insert yourselves where you aren’t wanted. I guess I am the magical equivalent of an oil-rich nation.”

“That’s a cheap shot, Asano.”

“You present such an easy target. I’ve heard that the Chinese and US branches are a lot more unified than most of the Network.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a strong national identity.”

“Fair enough. You know I’m Australian, right?”

“Australia is the kiddie pool. We look at you and see a man with infinite potential, but you’re stuck teaching the children to swim. You need come and join the adults who already know how or you’ll never fulfil your potential.”

“Oh, I didn’t realise you could explain it with an easy to understand metaphor; you’ve totally turned me around.”

“Sarcasm is also cheap.”

“And you’re treating me like an uneducated white voter. We may keep voting our own idiots in, Mr Houseman, but we’re not America yet.”

“You seem to have a problem with my country, Mr Asano.”

“Mate, everyone has a problem with your country. You made children fear the sky and that was your last president. Do I even need to talk about this one? We know you haven’t read him in on magic because it’s still a secret.”

“Mr Asano, you sound like a hipster art student. One semester of political science does not make you Noam Chomsky. Whatever you may think of my nation’s politics, our magical community is something else entirely.”

“For now.”

“If you remain here, Mr Asano, you’ll spend all your time lifting others up. Come with us and you’ll be the one who rises.”

“That’s a very capitalist pitch,” Jason said. “You’re proposing I choose selfishness over helping others.”

“You’re very high-minded for someone who tried to sell gold to Armenian gangsters.”

“Everyone’s a hypocrite, Mr Houseman. I’m not responsible for the largest military and the largest economy on the planet, so my selfish choices can only hurt so many people. Selfish choices is your country’s political doctrine at this point.”

“We need to move on from this unproductive topic, Mr Asano. You can hate our politics all you like, but as you just pointed out, we have the money and we have the power. This is as true of magic as it is of everything else. If you ever want to get your

friend home, you'll need the greatest knowledge base and the largest pool of magical resources on the planet. That's us."

"Speaking of my friend," Jason said. "You should call off your people looking for the chance to approach her separately. You won't like what happens if you if they do."

"You can't threaten me, Mr Asano. We aren't some half-baked French traitors trained in the worthless strategies that we forced on them. Our silver-rankers are more than capable of fighting on your terms. I know you aren't stupid enough to think you can beat one of them, let alone a small army of them. You can feel them around us. This is how many silver-rankers we had to spare for this trip."

"I'm not going to fight you," Jason said. "I'm going to give the world the tools to stand up to you."

"You aren't as valuable as you think, Mr Asano. Don't throw away a golden opportunity out of stubbornness. Think about your family. You can essence them up here, but we can make each and every one of them a powerhouse. They can all have mansions in Miami with a cupboard for monster cores in every one. We'll turn them all into silver-rankers, guaranteed. No expense spared."

"And all I have to do is clip a leash on my neck."

"I'm not looking to put you in a box," Lance said. "I'm offering you freedom. Freedom, within a much larger framework."

"So, a big box, then."

Lance shook his head.

"It pains me to look at someone like you, with all you could be, running around like a racehorse with blinders on. All you can see is the narrow path someone else has put in front of you. I want to open your eyes and let you see the world."

"As long as I follow the tour guide's directions," Jason said.

Lance sighed.

"I didn't want to bring this up," he said, "because I knew it would be a delicate topic. Your friend, Farrah. She's been through a lot. I wanted this to be a pleasant surprise after you signed on. We have expert counselling services that specialise in magic-related trauma. Our people can help her recover after the terrible circumstances she experienced because they have the training, the knowledge and the experience to give her the help we both know she needs."

"You seriously think that I would trust your people to crawl inside her head?" Jason asked. "I think we're done here."

"Negotiation is a long road," Mr Asano. "We'll talk again."

“Mr Houseman, I apologise for my ambiguity. I don’t actually think that we’re done here. I know we are. Definitely. This is a hard no.”

Houseman stood up and adjusted his jacket.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Mr Asano. You’ll come to realise that we aren’t trying to recruit you because we need you. We’re doing it because you need us.”

Jason remained seated, spooning some cream into his mouth.

“That’s alright, Mr Houseman. The hard way is kind of my thing.”

Houseman went outside and got into the back of a black Mercedes that drove away. Jason felt the nearby silver-rank auras retreat.

“He said silver-rank, rather than category three,” Shade observed.

“I noticed that, too,” Jason said. “Did you spot that one aura?”

“The silver-rank one that was free of monster core residue?” Shade asked. “Yes, I did. It was holding back, mostly likely outside of what they believed to be the range of your aura senses.”

“It seems that he wasn’t lying when he said that I’m not as valuable as I think. The Americans already have the training methods for non-core advancement.”

“It’s not overly surprising,” Shade said. “If they could figure out the right meditation techniques it wouldn’t be that hard. It’s unlikely they have a means as quick as using cores unless they have information from another world like you, but it would at least be an acceptable pace.”

“That makes sense,” Jason said.

He had learned that many branches had someone like Nigel who attempted to muddle through advancement without cores. They even had an informal network where they shared insights. Jason highly suspected that, like anyone with looting powers, the Americans snatched up anyone who made real progress.

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Being in Castle Heads already, Jason offered to pick Emi up from school. Erika agreed, especially since they were still living in Jason’s houseboat. When Jason and his niece arrived home, they heard music blasting from the rear of the houseboat.

Jason sensed Hiro in his cabin with the soundproofing to maximum, while Farrah and Taika appeared to be dancing on the rear deck. Farrah shut off the sound system as Jason approached, rushing up to him.

“Tina Turner is old!” she said.

“I’m aware,” Jason said.

“We need to get her essences, now.”

"I don't think the Network will be okay with that," Jason said.

"Did you ask?"

"Did I ask if it was okay to give Tina Turner a set of essences? No, I did not."

"Well, you have the speaky thing in your pocket, right?"

"You want me to call up a secret society of wizards whose core purpose includes hiding magic to ask if we can give magic to an internationally famous singer?"

"That would be great, thank you," Farrah said.

"It wasn't a suggestion," he said, running an exasperated hand over his face.

"It can't hurt to call, can it, Uncle Jason?"

"You too?" he asked Emi. "Don't give me the puppy dog eyes, that isn't going to ... oh bloody hell."

He jabbed a finger at his niece as he fished out his phone to make a call.

"I cannot believe I'm doing this. It's only because I need to call Anna anyway, and you both owe me for... Anna, G'day."

"What can I do for you, Mr Asano?"

"You can just call me Jason. Look, I've been asked to check if it's at all possible to give essences to Tina Turner."

"I'm afraid not," Annabeth said with a laugh. "The international Committee had to put a stop to giving celebrities essences in the eighties."

"It did happen, then?" Jason asked.

"Oh, yes," Annabeth said. "Willie Nelson, Christie Brinkley. They should have been more careful with the essences they gave Ozzy Osbourne."

"Is that why he's not dead? What about Australians?"

"Well, the Perth branch is almost entirely made up of Cricketers everyone thinks are dead. They keep proposing to magic up Steve Waugh and I know at least one instance they tried to give Boonie essences on the sly."

"So, that's a no on Tina Turner?"

"Maybe take it up with the Americans. Did you talk to our foreign guests, yet?"

"I did, but found their proposals unappealing. I'll come to you and finalise our agreement tomorrow."

"Oh, that's fantastic," Annabeth said, not hiding the relief in her voice. "They couldn't tempt you away?"

"You helped me get Farrah back," Jason said. "I know you and the International Committee had your own agenda, but you helped us and lost people in the process. I won't forget that."



## Chapter 330

### Moving Forward

On the top deck of the houseboat, Asya, Farrah and Jason were enjoying lunch as they looked over the final version of the agreement with the Network.

“While we have the agreement documented,” Asya said, tapping the papers on the table, “it’s a fiction, legally speaking. What court could we pursue violations in? In the end, it’s just a symbol of intent.”

“I like that though,” Jason said. “For all intents and purposes, it’s a handshake deal. It’s held together by integrity, and I’m all about integrity.”

“You are?” Farrah asked.

“Yep,” Jason said. “When I sell out my principles, they stay sold. Although, if I sold out *that* principle, then they wouldn’t stay sold because that principle is no longer in effect, which means my principles would get unsold, meaning that particular principle was in effect, which would mean...”

His ramble trailed off as he scratched his head in confusion. “Ethics is hard.”

Farrah shook her head.

“You know,” Asya said to Jason, “I never gave you a proper thank you for saving my life.”

The mock confusion dropped off Jason’s face as he looked her square in the eyes.

“I know that you were the one that pushed to get my chance at freeing Farrah. You never have to thank me for anything again. Ask and I’ll be there.”

“An infinite supply of favours?” Asya asked.

“Friends don’t count favours,” Jason said. “They just show up.”

“Is that what we are?” Asya asked.

“Don’t look down on friendship,” Jason said. “It’s the foundation of every positive relationship. I love my dad, I love my sister and my niece. While I love my Mum and my brother too, even after everything, it isn’t the same with them. They’ll always be family, but the friendship isn’t there. Some family you want to see every day, and some you only see at Christmas. That extends to every relationship, from lovers to co-workers to people you escaped a cannibal cult with.”

“That was weird way to meet,” Farrah said. “One of these days I’ll be the one saving you.”

“Friendship,” Jason continued, “is having people to share the best and the worst days of your life with. Friendship is knowing there will be someone you can rely on, no matter what. Friendship can let you travel back in time.”

“What?” Asya asked.

“Wait,” Jason said, frowning. “That last one might just be Final Fantasy VIII.”

“Don’t underestimate having Jason as a friend,” Farrah said. “When I was a stranger he risked everything to save me, when he had every expectation of getting killed. Once I was a friend he brought me back from the dead.”

“I don’t think that was technically me,” Jason said.

“Shut up, I’m telling a story.”

“As you were,” conceded an admonished Jason.

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Farrah walked Asya off the boat.

“I’m not a threat to you,” Farrah said.

“I never thought you were,” Asya said, drawing a chuckle from Farrah.

“I can help you with aura control,” Farrah said. “It’ll make your emotions less of an open book.”

Asya’s eyes went wide.

“Does Jason...?”

“Yes,” Farrah said. “His strongest talent is weaponising his aura but he excels in every facet of aura manipulation, including reading emotions through auras. He restricts himself, of course, to respect the privacy of others, but when someone is weaker than him and has poor control, clear and strong are like shouting. He cannot help but overhear.”

Asya buried her face in her hands.

“Don’t walk off the deck,” Farrah warned. “I wouldn’t worry about it. It’s not like you’ve made any secret of your intentions, even disregarding magic.”

“Should I just ask him out?”

“I don’t know,” Farrah said. “I think there’s a good chance he’d say no for the simple fact that he doesn’t need any more complications in his life. On the other hand, do you want someone else sweeping in and taking your opportunity?”

“No,” Asya said firmly.

“Then make a social overture. The worst thing that can happen is he says no.”

“What if it makes things weird?”

“Your biggest risk is him feeling smug that a woman like you would be interested in him. It would just get lost in his regular smugness, so it’ll be fine.”

“He’s always been very confident.”

“Or seemed that way,” Farrah said. “He’s good at masking his fear and uncertainty, even in his aura. It’s like the first person he convinces is always himself.”

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“Well?” Cleary asked.

Houseman was talking over a secure video link with the Assistant Director of Operations, Los Angeles Network branch.

“He’s too inculcated with anti-American sentiment. As if his government was any different. They’re just worse at it.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Cleary said, “but we’ve come across principled people before. We don’t land every fish.”

“I’m not sure we can afford to let this one off the hook. I think he intends to democratise some of the advantages that we’ve been keeping to ourselves. He potentially poses a threat to our position.”

“We can live with that,” Cleary said. “We anticipated leaking some of this in the next few years anyway. Things are coming to a head and we’ve heard China was looking to make some overtures to the world at large as part of their goals to become the sole hegemon once magic goes public. If we can’t beat them to that punch, we can at least take some wind out of their sails by letting the treasures they were going to bestow come from a source that doesn’t pose us any threat.”

“You’re saying we should walk away? We don’t want to consider taking the outworlder off the board?”

“Are you advocating that?”

“No,” Houseman said. “The guy unnerves me. I was told about his aura beforehand but nothing prepares you for experiencing it for yourself. If he stands and fights, we can put him down, no question. If he runs, though, our security team isn’t confident of containment. My instincts tell me that he is not an enemy I want out there in the dark.”

“You’re the man on the ground, so your opinion holds a lot of weight. It also aligns with our own concerns. The International Committee knows what the outworlders represent. The IC may just be there to rubber stamp the things we want but they’ve had a taste of the good stuff, now. They’ll buck if we’re that blatant about snatching it away from them. If the outworlders come to us on their own, that’s one thing, but us taking them out is another.”

“We could blame it on the Chinese.”

“Too risky. That’s my sense, anyway. Our response will have to be decided above the branch level, so we’ll take your report to the National Council. Anticipate them wanting a video briefing from you. I imagine the response will be to let it go, though. We have no idea what kind of tricks he brought back from the other world. In the meantime, hold tight, stay quiet and don’t cause trouble.”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s not like we won’t get any nuggets of gold that he drops on the International Committee anyway,” Cleary said. “In fact, we get first pick off the pile. Most likely we’ll shift our approach to dominating the International Committee’s interactions with the outworlders.”

“I know that decision is above my head,” Houseman said, “but I think that would be the sound approach.”

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Jason and Farrah were sat at a table in the houseboat, going over lists.

“You’ll need to trade some of these essences with the Network,” Farrah said. “You have far too many growth and plant essences. You can certainly use some of them, but you should swap them out for a selection of common essences before we take a proper look at what we give to your family.”

“The renewal essence I have I want to give to Taika,” Jason said. “I was thinking an immortal confluence.”

“That’s generous,” Farrah said. “Renewal essences can sell for as much as top-rarity ones.”

“Taika has already agreed to be the head of security for my family,” Jason said. “I want him to have top flight powers, plus I feel responsible for dragging him into this.”

“That puts him on the list of people we train instead of feed up with cores,” Farrah said. “We need to determine which members of your family go on that list.”

“The only ones I’m willing to consider are Erika, Ian and, eventually, Emi. The rest get cores, end of story. My guess is that Erika and Ian won’t go for it, though. Just convincing them to let us train Emi will be a thing.”

“They’re too old anyway, to be honest,” Farrah said. “Even with a power to use skill books to catch up with, this world doesn’t have the skill books. If you want family members who are trained properly, you need them to be Emi’s age or younger and start training them now.”

“That would mean expanding the pool of family members who know the truth,” Jason said. “We just promised the Network to be careful about that.”

“We also promised to train up a group of young people from the Network’s families,” Farrah said. “You and I will do better to retain a level of independence, but your family joining the Network as a whole would be nothing but beneficial.”

“You think the Network would go for that?”

“They’d do it just to sink their roots into you,” Farrah said.

“Good point,” Jason said. “They have the experience and resources for a mass induction, too. All I could do would be to set up a movie theatre and show them all my holiday vlog.”

“I’m going to train Hiro in array magic,” Farrah said. “That should be more manageable than adventurer training, especially with the right essences.”

There was a whiteboard next to them with two columns labelled trade and keep. As they went through Jason’s essences, picking combinations for his family, they had been sorting the essences into the two columns.

Jason glanced at the keep column, where the first three listed essences had been reserved by Farrah for Hiro. Two were amongst his highest-rarity essences, the vast and rune essences. The third was the common, but still valuable, magic essence. That would produce the Prosperity confluence, which was shared by Neil from his team back in the other world. The resulting powers would be very different, though, being a combination hand-picked by Farrah to synergise with array magic.

“I’d love to have a set like that myself,” Farrah said, “but it’s not suited for adventuring. It’s a classic crafting combination, with almost everyone who has it being a core user. Not to say that it can’t be used in a fight, although it seriously lacks efficiency when operating on less than a battlefield-scale conflict.”

“It’s common, then?”

“The vast essence is of the highest rarity, so common isn’t the right word. It’s probably the most widely-used combination involving that essence, though. Anyone who has it is never lacking for work in any high-magic regions. You’ll see why as Hiro and I work on your family compound project together.”

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The park at Castle Bluff had an oddly elaborate obstacle course, courtesy of a town councillor obsessed with fitness. Since he was so adamant about acquiring funding for healthy school lunch program and child fitness initiatives, he had no concerns about retaining his seat year after year. Now in his seventies, he could still be found using the obstacle course himself every week. Jason and Farrah knew him enough to say hello after using the park for mobility training every day for weeks.

They picked up Emi from school and, wary of being seen using portals, drove to Castle Bluff Park. On this day there was a pair of people mover vans following them around.

“Is this the best use of our time?” a man said as people clambered out of the van. “I don’t see why we couldn’t do all this in Sydney.”

“You’re the ones who rocked up early and I’m not shifting my schedule,” Jason said.

“If you’re not on a monster hunt, you don’t skip training,” Farrah added. “You can either join in or stand around and complain.”

“Bugger it, I’m in,” Cotsworth said. “I want to see what kind of routine you get up to.”

The Director of Tactical Operations for every Network branch in Australia had descended on Casselton Beach to discuss a nationwide training program. They arrived three hours early, which was how they ended up trailing along behind Jason and Farrah.

“Who are they?” Koen Waters asked Jason. He inclined his head in the direction of a gaggle of teenagers holding up phones. Around half of them were wearing uniforms from local private schools.

“High school students,” Jason said. “They started filming us last week. I had Shade check them out but they’re just putting our training up on line. We make sure not to show them anything too outlandish. Are you going to join us?”

“No thank you,” Koen said. “I have my own routine.”

“Well if you’re just hanging about, take the others and try out that food truck over there,” Jason advised, pointing. “I recommend the kimchi fries.”

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That evening, the assembled Network personnel were gathered in the media room of the houseboat.

“Can I buy one of these chairs off you?” Cotsworth asked, luxuriating in the cloud furniture.

“No,” Jason said. “Technically, they’re not chairs. They’re part of the houseboat, which is not technically a houseboat.”

Behind him was a screen with paused footage from one of his most recent forays into a proto-astral space.

“I know you’ve all been analysing the way Farrah and myself fight but tonight we’re going to go over that together, along with comparisons of our approach versus the standard Network tactics. We have two goals to achieve before you leave at the end of the week. One: build a framework to train your future tactical units to include strike teams specialising in the elimination of high-rank dimensional entities. Two: develop a retraining

program to establish those specialist teams using existing tactical personnel in the short term.”

He sent a mental command and the media player produced by the houseboat started producing an image.

“We’re going to start by looking at Farrah. In the fight we’re about to watch, observe how many different essence abilities she uses and contrast that with your standard tactics. Note that instead of using her abilities to occasionally supplement attacks, she chains abilities, one after the other...”

## Chapter 331

### Flemish Baroque

In the office at her restaurant, Erika was talking to Jason through an incarnation of Shade. After weeks of such communication, it was starting to feel normal which, when she thought about, was rather concerning.

"I told him you had contacts," Erika said. "What was I supposed to say? That your eyes changed when you became a gestalt entity of body and spirit? I don't even know what that means."

"Well," Jason said, "it basically means that... actually, I'm still kind of figuring it out."

"When will you be back?"

"Not until I pick up Emi at school. Will you be coming to the houseboat for dinner?"

"Yeah, although I'm concerned about bringing him to the houseboat. Ian hasn't forgiven me yet for making him go home and give up the cloud bed."

"You know that you're welcome to keep staying here."

"I just want to maintain some normalcy," Erika said. "Is that so bad?"

"I get it," Jason said. "I just know from experience that when you stop obsessing over normal and give yourself over to magic, life gets amazing."

"You realise you're starting to sound religious when you talk like that."

"Speaking of religious, did anyone tell Great Aunt Marjory about magic yet?"

"No, and we're not going to," Erika said. "If she finds out that you came back from the dead, heal the sick and can walk on water, she is not going to keep the secret. Will anyone on talkback radio believe her? Probably not, but she's already intimated that the devil sent you back. I don't want her roaming around town yelling 'false prophet' at passers-by."

"That's fair."

"You know, Jase, what you said about giving over to magic. It's not all good. It's getting harder to go around living my life with everything I've learned. How do I treat everything as normal when I know about teleporting, secret monsters and alternate worlds. You're a sorcerer. It suddenly hit me the other day that you can cure cancer with a literal magic spell. How am I meant to go around living an ordinary life like that?"

"You're not. There's a clock running on ordinary life for everyone. The difference is that you get a head start, with the time, knowledge and resources to get ready. I've just been waiting for you to accept that so we can move on to the next step."

"Like Taika."

"Exactly."



“How’s he doing?”

“He’s monsterring it,” Jason said. “I don’t know who taught that guy to fight but he can fight. A lot like Farrah, actually, so she’s helping him adapt to his new strength and speed.”

When they had discussed essences with Taika, he had ended up not going for the combination Jason had picked out for him. After discussing his options, he had forgone the renewal essence and the immortal confluence it would bring. He had picked out for himself the more economical combination of might, swift and bird that produced the garuda confluence.

“Garuda is the devourer of snakes, bro. That’s hardcore.”

“I hope there’s more to your decision than that,” Farrah had told him.

“Bro, Garuda is the fastest and strongest warrior there is. Speed, strength, skill. No offence, but those powers you picked out would just make me the big, tough, slow guy. I don’t want to accuse you of looking at me and immediately thinking that but you looked at me and immediately thought that.”

“That’s the kind of reasoning we wanted to hear,” Farrah said approvingly. “Also, don’t call me bro.”

Farrah had been concerned that the bird essence might produce some abilities that were less combative and more like the power to talk to birds. That was fine when there were intelligent, magical birds flapping about, but seagulls were less likely to be a combat asset and more likely to keep asking for chips.

Jason had traded with the Network to obtain the much rarer wing essence. The resulting combination would still produce the garuda essence, with a result very much in line with Humphrey. He also had the might and wing essences leading to a supernatural creature confluence, in his case, dragon.

Jason and Farrah had anticipated a power set similar to Humphrey’s, producing a mobile, high-resilience brawler. They had only awakened around a third of Taika’s abilities, but the results, thus far, were falling completely into line. Clive had taught Jason about shaping a power set not by seeking out specific powers, but by aiming for powers within a certain scope.

This was proving out with Taika. Jason was deeply familiar with the Humphrey-style group role, while Farrah knew how to fight like Taika, adapting his approach to his new abilities. His performance had helped convince the Network to grant him a spot as an external auxiliary to their tactical teams. He lacked the independence of Jason and Farrah but had gotten to go face to face with monsters. After the usual reaction of being taken

aback when faced with a living, drooling creature, he started going to town on the iron-rank monsters.

There was quite a crowd when Taika had undergone his essence rituals. Jason's family all knew that essences were coming to them and were anxious to see what it looked like. At first, they were quite enthusiastic, up until Jason was hosing the gunk off the newly iron-rank Taika on the rear deck. It was universally agreed that it was the worse thing any of them had ever smelled.

"So, are you spending your day training Taika and the magic soldiers of tomorrow?" Erika asked.

"No, I've largely offloaded that on Farrah. She has more experience with the training methods than I do, but I translate concepts better. We've fallen into a rhythm where she does the initial training and I help clarify things to the recruits."

"What are you doing with your day, then?" Erika asked. "Clinic?"

"Yep. I have to say, it feels good to be helping people without killing things. I did a lot of that in my early days over in the other world. I kind of lost track of that as life took over and it's nice to get back to it."

"I'm proud of you, little brother," Erika said. "It's the one part of all this that isn't horrifying."

"It can't be the only part. I mean, look at how awesome Shade is. He's like a phone, except snide and somehow British."

"And flies my daughter around in a rocket suit. Which you have not done again, right?"

"Of course he hasn't," Jason said. "Have you, Shade?"

"I find it best not to involve myself in family disputes," Shade said.

"See?" Jason asked.

"That was not a denial."

"I didn't see you complaining when he was a bunch of horses running along the beach at sunset."

"I don't think you're allowed to take horses on that beach," Erika said weakly.

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"The medication will make you feel a little loopy," the nurse said. "You might also have some mild hallucinations. Most patients report seeing a red glow, possibly some other colours."

"Are you sure I can't go in with her?" the girl's mother asked.

“I’m afraid no one can be in the treatment room,” the nurse said. “That’s for legal and medical reasons. You did sign the non-disclosure, yes?”

“I did,” the mother said. “It was very strongly-worded.”

The nurse glanced over at the receptionist, who nodded.

“We’re working with experimental procedures,” the nurse said. “The company is protecting millions, sometimes billions in investment. We’re able to provide you with free care only because you’ve agreed to provide testimonials once the product rolls out. I’m sure you’ll be more than enthusiastic once you see the results for yourself.”

Several minutes later, the young girl was sitting upright on an examination chair, disoriented from a potion that would dull her senses and leave her memory hazy. Her head was held in place by a head frame, like that of an optometrist, on which she was resting her chin. She was also holding onto handles on the side of the frame, which helped her not topple over from the potion-induced dizziness.

“That’s excellent,” the nurse said. “You may hear something behind you but I need you to keep your head in the frame and not look back, alright?”

“Okay,” the girl agreed in a doped-up, sing-song voice.

Behind the exam chair, a hidden door opened in the wall and Jason stepped silently into the room, his cloak of stars already in place. That way, if he was spotted, it would fit into the hallucination story the clinic was selling. Since his display at the children’s hospital, numerous individuals had subsequently come forward, claiming to have been healed by, or even be the Starlight Angel. With the waters already muddied, a few extra stories wouldn’t blip on the radar.

Jason murmured his spell as quietly as he could get away with and still have it work.

*“Feed me your sins.”*

“Ooh, I see the colours,” the girl said. “I feel funny.”

“You’re doing great, sweetie,” the nurse said.

After he was done, Jason retreated through the door, which closed silently behind him. All through the clinic, other essence users were doing similar things. They had even taken to wearing dark cloaks with sequins to further the Starlight Angel narrative.

Jason was the only person at the clinic whose cleansing power actually replenished his mana rather than burning through it. This made him one of the clinic’s most valuable assets. The ability to clear out poisons and toxins was valuable, with the inability to heal injuries his only major shortfall.

Dealing with highly visible wounds was a trickier prospect for the clinic than largely invisible afflictions. They did not deal with normal injuries, as that would rapidly get them

exposed, leaving such cases to ordinary hospitals. Instead, they specialised in 'experimental procedures' that would allow otherwise permanent injuries to recover fully over time.

The clinic did have an emergency department, where arrangements had been made to redirect the worst injuries before they reached a hospital. Those cases had a frequent occurrence of the person's injuries turning out to be not as bad as the initial EMT assessment.

After Jason was done, the girl was given a bed in the recovery ward for observation. This allowed the staff to watch for any adverse reactions to the magic while adding enough medical rigmarole to make the results seem like less of a miracle cure.

The private clinic was almost the size of a full hospital, but operating without fanfare or even signage. Network-affiliated personnel in hospitals around the country made quiet referrals and transfers to clinics all around the country, making sure any inconvenient medical records discreetly disappeared.

Jason increasingly spent his mornings and early afternoons at the Sydney clinic while Farrah settled in at the Network's training facility outside the city. In the afternoon they would portal back, pick up Emi from school and do their own daily training routine, much of which had to be hidden from prying eyes.

They would start with Emi in Castle Bluff Park for physical training, followed by meditation. They would then return her to the houseboat, her home or her mother's restaurant before engaging in heavier training. Weights could be done on the houseboat, while the more extreme mobility training required portalling to a remote location.

Farrah had claimed a section of ground on Ken's property and used her Earth-shaping power to create an outlandish obstacle course that looked more like an art installation than anything navigable by people. Ken would often watch, astounded by the acrobatic prowess of the two bronze-rankers.

Any of these processes could be and were interrupted by dimensional incursions which, given the scope of the whole country, were taking place every day. The most common were category one incursions, which Jason didn't participate in. Farrah did in the course of training up recruits, who were exposed to carefully curated iron-rank monsters.

Most days had a category two somewhere in the country, with Jason participating in almost all of them so that the Network could make use of his communication and looting services. It didn't take long before he had participated in incursions across each of the eight states and territories, showering riches down on the country's various branches.

Jason and Farrah both took the lead in category three incursions. Rather than take on the silver-rank monsters they were best suited for, they started going for less ideal matches to push themselves. Jason only did this to a limited degree, as many silvers still provided him with plenty of challenge.

Farrah would go further, taking on creatures like yowies where it was not her skill but her resource management that was pushed to the limit. Her power set gave her the strength to overpower even the stronger silver-rank monsters in short order, but doing so exhausted her reserves. The challenges that would help her cross the line into silver were not ones of power but of endurance.

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Weeks became months as winter moved into spring. Jason and Farrah settled into life on Earth, with Farrah's façade of being alright following her ordeal slowly becoming reality. They did not lose track of the idea of finding a way back to the other world, however, as they went over the large collection of astral magic books they had every night.

Spending the increasingly pleasant evenings on the open top deck of the houseboat, they studied the books together. Farrah had the superior grasp of theory but Jason was the astral magic specialist. He also had the advantage of much of his learning coming through the same books they were studying. Clive had seen little point in educating Jason in astral magic that would soon be obsolete when Knowledge had provided such an unparalleled asset.

Jason had the original books on astral magic given to him by Knowledge, which were riddled with notes made by Clive both before and during their time in the astral space.

"Astral magic isn't my area," Farrah said, "but even I can tell this is far more advanced than what we had in the past."

"That's what Clive said," Jason told her.

"How smart is that guy?" she asked, shaking her head in disbelief as she read through his notes. "This is beyond advanced and he deciphered it like it's nothing. Every book I pick up is full of brilliant insights. The guy's a monster."

"Good thing, too," Jason said. "He's the reason that Greenstone wasn't wiped out and a bunch of diamond-rank super golems aren't rampaging across your world. I just wish I knew if they made it out alive."

"They did," a voice drifted up to the top deck. Jason and Farrah had both sensed a person on the marina, but the unfamiliar, normal-rank aura had caused them to dismiss it. They went to the edge of the deck to look at the person standing on the dock in front of the houseboat.

It was a woman who looked around thirty, with alabaster skin and long, ruby hair. She was wearing a white summer dress with orange and yellow accents.

“Permission to come aboard?” she asked.

“Who are you?” Jason asked.

She frowned.

“Sorry,” she said. “We’ll have to do this later.”

“Do what?” Jason asked, then his and Farrah’s phones started beeping, the message that meant there had been a dimensional incursion.

“Another day, Mr Asano,” the woman said as she walked away. “It was nice to finally meet you, though.”

“But not me, apparently,” Farrah muttered.

“Who are you?” Jason called out.

“Your favourite painter,” she called back, without stopping or turning.

“You’re Peter Paul Rubens?” Jason asked in a confused voice.

The woman stopped and turned around to give him an incredulous look.

“What?” Jason asked. “You claim to be a man who died in 1640 and you’re the one who looks surprised?”

## Chapter 332

### Not Ready to Leave

Despite their outward dismissiveness, Jason and Farrah had no trouble finding challenge from silver rank monsters, although in very different ways. Farrah was all about frontloading damage, making endurance the key for her while Jason was just the opposite.

The start of a fight was the most dangerous time for him. The enemy was at their strongest, with full reserves, while his abilities lacked immediate impact. His one instantaneous damage power required considerable setup, which left an eruption of Colin and Gordon's exploding spheres as his only blitz moves.

The longer a fight went on, the better for Jason as the enemy grew weaker and he grew stronger. The best way for Jason to challenge himself, then, was to fight weaker enemies in higher numbers, consigning himself to a constant state of the beginning portion of fights.

When he had taken such fights against bronze-rank monsters, it had been a frustrating experience. They lacked the fortitude to survive long enough for Jason's full abilities to come into play. In most instances, Jason had to work hard to even use his execute before the monsters died, making it a hard power to advance.

Even that required effort incommensurate with the results. Starting all the way back at iron-rank, his powers had often felt pointlessly elaborate, when a simple chunk of immediate damage was so much more effective. Watching Humphrey carve through monsters had been an almost emasculating experience, with his team deliberately leaving him monsters to kill on his own. Only against the toughest monsters did he feel like he was truly contributing, leaving him as an addendum to his own team.

It was once they started challenging silver-rank monsters that Jason felt his powers come into their own. Even the weakest silver-rank monster had a startling resilience, which meant that Jason was no longer racing to use all his abilities on an enemy before it died. At the same time, adventurers Jason had long envied, like Humphrey, were no longer taking down one or more enemies with a single sword-swing.

Although fighting packs of silver-rank monsters was objectively more difficult than their lower-rank equivalents, Jason finally felt like he was truly pushing himself. No longer was he reaching the end of the fight just as he was hitting his stride. In his latter days in the astral space, and now the proto-spaces of Earth, he felt that he was becoming the adventurer he was meant to be from the beginning.

“I think we told you this from the beginning,” Farrah said as Jason shared his feelings on the flight home from the latest proto-space. “Affliction specialists are kind of a waste at low rank.”

“I still need to work on fighting in the open,” Jason said. “Shade does a great job of letting me jump between his bodies, always moving where I need him. I need to work on making the most of the opportunities he sets up for me.”

“Stick to bronze-ranks for that, for now,” Farrah advised. “Until you’re better at it, taking on silvers in the open is too much of a risk unless they’re as sluggish as a yowie.”

Jason had been incorporating Shade’s mount forms into his combat style more and more against the larger, slower monsters. The new approach was a way to develop in a new direction using enemies he was traditionally strong against, which typically didn’t help his advancement.

To make the most of his superhuman coordination and reflexes, he sought out environments to practise this new methodology. He went out bush to find improvised obstacle courses for Shade’s motorcycle and horse forms, along with more alien and exotic animals.

“They have mantis beetles on Earth?” Farrah asked, having joined him on one such excursion.

“Definitely not,” Jason said.

“So, Shade can take forms from other worlds?”

“Yep,” Jason said.

“Then why can’t Shade take a heidel form?”

“Technically, the shape-changing is Mr Asano’s power,” Shade said. “You will need to ask him.”

“Magic’s very complicated,” Jason said. “Who amongst us can truly claim to understand all its vagaries?”

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In Jason’s cabin, the furniture was currently configured into a pair of large armchairs in which Jason and Farrah were sitting. They were looking at the two paintings on the wall, specifically the one titled The Invasion of Pallimustus. It depicted a series of orbital cities floating around Farrah’s homeworld.

“And that woman who came by painted this?” she asked.

“Most likely,” Jason said. “She goes by the name Dawn, although she’s suspiciously elusive. The Network and the Cabal have been trying to find her for months and coming up empty.”



“She was definitely a normal person,” she said. “Unless she’s so powerful that she can fool our senses, but that would have to be diamond rank. My perception power enhanced my aura senses when it hit silver and with your soul strength, your senses aren’t much weaker.”

“Can a diamond-ranker even survive in magic this low?” Jason asked.

“I don’t know,” Farrah said. “When it comes to diamond-rankers, the rules you and I live by are more like guidelines. For all I know, she’s somehow artificially reduced her rank. More likely, she’s fronting for someone else, though. Since when do you and I warrant the attention of a diamond ranker?”

Jason nodded at the painting.

“Since that became an issue, I suspect. Assuming it’s actually happening. If your world really is suffering an invasion, I’m guessing the painting is a metaphor. Rather than an invasion from space, I would put money on it being dimensional.”

“What makes you think that?” Farrah asked.

“I’ve already helped stop one dimensional invasion and I doubt we were the Builder’s biggest concern or he would have sent more powerful people. Plus there’s the fact that someone clearly wants us involved. Maybe because we’re outworlders.”

“Someone?”

“My money would be on the World-Phoenix,” Jason said. “Otherwise, what reason would she have to intervene in my affairs. I’m less than a speck of dust for a being like that to brush off its shoulder.”

“Do you think it’s happening right now?” Farrah asked.

“I don’t know any more than you,” Jason said. “My intuition says no. Why bother to tell us about it when we don’t have a way back, yet.”

“You still think the astral magic books will have one?” Farrah said. “There’s a lot of information about dimension crossing, but breaching an astral space is very different from crossing realities.”

“When Knowledge gave me those books, she was the only person in the world who both knew that I had the World-Phoenix token and what it would do. I suspect she chose the contents of those books very carefully. I just need to study them until I understand it. Thankfully, I have Clive’s notes to guide me.”

“You’re not ready to leave yet, though.”

“No,” Jason said. “Once we find our way back, there’s no telling if I’ll ever be able to return to Earth. Even if I can, it could easily be decades. Before I go, I want to make sure my family is equipped for whatever comes their way once magic comes out into the open.”

“You haven’t even started giving them essences, yet.”

“I’m leaving that decision to Erika. I feel like I don’t have the right perspective. I think she’s coming around, though.”

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Asya and Farrah arrived at the marina together, getting out of Asya’s car.

“You still haven’t asked him out?” Farrah asked.

“The timing just hasn’t been right.”

“It’s been months. ‘Timing’ clearly means that in all this time, you’ve never worked up the nerve.”

“No!” Asya said. “Okay, yes. But it is unnerving. He knows what I’m feeling every time I stand in front of him.”

“He knows what you’re feeling right now,” Farrah said. “Your aura training is coming along nicely but Jason’s so good in that area and his soul is so strong. If it’s even still a soul anymore.”

“What does that mean?”

“The body and soul are intrinsically connected but there’s still a dichotomy between them. One is physical and temporary. The other is spiritual and eternal. Jason doesn’t have that dichotomy anymore. He’s flesh and spirit in one; the physical embodiment of his soul.”

“Does that mean his soul is now temporary?”

“I don’t know,” Farrah said. “Even he isn’t sure exactly what price he paid to come get me.”

“You can feel the difference,” Asya said. “From before and after he did whatever it was he did to get access to that astral space. He didn’t hesitate for a second. Did you and Jason really never...?”

“Why do people keep asking that. Do you not have friends in this world? There’s no one I’d rather have beside me when the world burns down, but he isn’t even close to my type. I mean, Jason’s great, but he’s also a lot.”

“Some of us want a lot.”

“Then why are you standing in the car park talking to me? He’s over there on the appropriately ostentatious houseboat.”

As they were about to head off down the dock, a car pulled up beside them and Jason’s old friend Greg stepped out. He was visibly nervous at the sight of the two startlingly attractive women.

“Hello, Greg,” Asya said. “It’s been a while.”

“Asya,” Greg greeted uncertainly. “Miss Hurin.”

Greg had gone to school with Asya and Jason. Farrah, he met only briefly, although he had driven past her and Jason on their insane runs to Castle Bluff. He fished a large, squared-off bag from the back seat of his car.

“I, uh, didn’t realise you’d be here,” Greg said to Asya.

“Jason said you were bringing some board games for us to play,” Asya said. Somewhere inside of Greg, his fifteen-year-old self let out a whimper.

“Yep,” he said, his voice oddly high.

Craig Vermillion pulled up on the other side of Greg, also getting out of his car. Greg looked from Asya’s 1962 MGA Roadster to Craig’s 1967 Maserati Ghibli, then at his 2017 Ford Taurus.

“I’m the boring one, aren’t I?” he asked. “This is high school all over again.”

Asya gave him a smile.

“Come, on, Greg. If all your friends are cool, what does that say about you?”

“That they need a designated driver.”

They made their way along the dock to the houseboat. As Greg was still in the dark, magic-wise, the houseboat’s interior was disguised. Jason had turned the bar lounge into a bar and game room, with two large game tables with the tops that had been removed to reveal sunken, felt-lined interiors. Another table was covered in snack trays.

Jason and Taika were waiting when they arrived, Jason mixing up cocktails behind the bar as Taika clipped cup holders onto the sides of the tables

“Your houseboat comes with a dedicated board game room?” Greg asked.

“It’s kind of modular,” Jason said. “At this point, it pretty much comes with everything.”

“This houseboat is crazy.”

“He has a whole other superyacht he has moored at Castle Heads,” Asya said.

The EOA, as it turned out, took Jason at his word when he told them he was taking the yacht he took over following the plane attack. As part of a scramble to avoid retaliation for their participation in Farrah’s incarceration, they had signed it over and sailed it to the east coast. Not knowing what to do with it, Jason left it at the Castle Heads marina. There he didn’t have to rent a second slip for the huge vessel, the way he did with the houseboat at Casselton beach. Giant yachts were much more the norm there.

“Jason,” Greg said, “not to put too fine a point on it, but are you a drug dealer?”

“No, although funny story: you remember how we used to play El Grande all the time back in school?”

“Sure,” Greg said.

“Well,” Jason said, “not long after I got back, I was selling some gold to these Armenian mobsters and they had El Grande set up. Proper game table and everything; I thought of you immediately. Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Armenian mobsters?”

“Yeah, bro,” Taika said. “I was there for that. All these hardcore-looking blokes hanging about, looking like they’re going to break your legs. Then you spot the board game and realise that we’re not all so different after all. It was kind of heart-warming.”

“Selling gold?” Greg asked, still looking at Jason like he was an alien.

“I did some work out of town while everyone thought I was dead. That’s where I met Farrah, actually. Anyway, I came back with a bunch of gold bars I picked in the Kalahari – not really meant to talk about that – and I needed some walking around money. You know my uncle Hiro was always a bit shady and he hooked me up.”

“This all sounds completely ridiculous.”

“You’ve got no idea, mate,” Jason said. “I can’t even begin to tell you the big stuff. Can I?”

“No,” Asya said firmly. “Like I told you when you wanted to tell the butcher: you made a confidentiality agreement.”

“But the anecdote didn’t really work unless...”

“Then the answer is to not tell the anecdote,” she said.

Greg took the games out of his bag, one of them catching Jason’s eye.

“That one’s about hunting a vampire, right?”

“Yeah,” Greg said. “It’s an all-versus-one game.”

“That’s a bit insensitive,” Jason said, glancing at Craig.

“Why?” Greg.

“Uh, no reason,” Jason said, Asya glaring at him again.

Shortly thereafter, Ian, Erika and Emi came aboard, Emi moving straight to Jason.

“Virgin piña colada,” Jason said, handing her a readied drink. “At least, I think that’s the virgin one. If not, don’t tell your Mum.”

“Stop corrupting my daughter,” Erika scolded. “Greg, it’s great to see you. I meant to tell you how amazing that costume was that you wore to my fancy dress party.”

“Thanks,” Greg said. “I was worried an elaborate Iron Man costume might make people think I was lonely enough to have time to make it.”

“No,” Erika said with a straight face. “Nobody thought that.”

## Chapter 333

### Decision

As everyone packed up to go home, Greg found Jason in the kitchen.

"This was really great," Greg told Jason. "Most of our old friends left for university and never came back, and I've never been great at making new ones. There was Amy, but after what she did, forget that."

"You came back so you could inherit your dad's law firm, right?"

"Yeah, but that's not working out. David's big-city career didn't work out, so he's back. Dad hasn't exactly said it, but he was always the favourite, so..."

Jason groaned.

"I'm not a big bible guy, as you know," he said. "I'm starting to come around on the idea of killing all the firstborn sons, though. Also, your dad sucks. Is your mum still super hot?"

"Dude, that's not cool."

"I'm just saying, your mum is super hot."

"How would you feel if I went and hit on Farrah?"

"Mate, if you've got the courage, then go for it."

"I do not. She's super cute, though. Is she an athlete or something?"

"Private security contractor."

"Like a mercenary?"

"Yeah. She was one of the people that trained me."

"Wait, that's the mysterious job?"

"It's a little more complicated than that, but more or less."

"I do like your friends," Greg said. "They're a little weird, but cool weird, you know. You've always been good with people like that. Are we going to do a night like this again?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "I can't guarantee a regular schedule, but I'd like that a lot. My life is aching for some normalcy."

"Well, mine is aching for some weirdness," Greg said.

"I can probably arrange something like that."

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Jason's guests left, with Shade serving as designated driver for Craig, Ian and Asya since the only ones who hadn't been drinking alcohol were Greg and Emi.

"What if a cop pulls us over and there's a shadow man in the driver's seat?" Ian asked after Greg had driven away.

“You mean Paul?” Erika asked. “Nah, he’s running bingo tonight.”

Erika remained behind as Jason wanted to discuss the family’s essence situation. After seeing the others off, Jason, Erika and Farrah settled into comfortable chairs to talk.

“I know we said that we would hold off on the family’s essences until you felt the time was right,” Jason told Erika. “We’re going to move forward with Hiro’s, though.”

“I’ve been teaching him formation magic,” Farrah said. “He’s still a novice, but he’s far enough along that with the right essences and awakening stones, he’ll be setting himself up as a good formation specialist. After some trading with the Network, we have those ready to go.”

“Hiro has purchased some land and he and Farrah are going to start planning out the development,” Jason said.

“We need to know what capabilities Hiro will be bringing to the table before then,” Farrah added.

“He’s bought land, already?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “A nice stretch of clifftop land down the coast, nestled right in a gap between national parks. A development group bribed the Deputy Premier to get it approved for commercial development, only to pull out of the project very suddenly, for undisclosed reasons. They sold the land to Uncle Hiro for a steal.”

“And you expect the family to move there?”

“I have no expectations,” Jason said. “It’ll be available to the family, which I suspect they’ll be glad of sooner than I’d like.”

“You really think things will get that bad?” Erika asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I don’t see a scenario where magic goes public and it’s a safe, smooth transition, though. Even if there aren’t any magic complication, which seems unlikely at best, there’s no telling what kind of social upheavals could take place. If everything works out, then great. If not, we’ll have a sanctuary.”

“I’ve seen enough of your society to see that while you claim to be equal, you are anything but,” Farrah said.

“The families connected to the Network will be the new oligarchs,” Jason added. “We don’t have to join them but we don’t want to be beholden to them. We need an infrastructure in place to pass magic on to the next generation. The Asano estate will be the centre of that.”

“The Asano Estate,” Erika repeated. “This is really happening, isn’t it?”

“Everything is going to change, sooner or later,” Jason said. “I think that the reason you’re dragging your feet on the essences is that you understand that. You know that once

we start magicking-up the family, we're on a road away from normal that doesn't loop back."

"You're right," Erika said. "Ian and I have been talking about this a lot. I told you that it was hard living an ordinary life knowing everything I know, now. I don't like that feeling."

Jason narrowed his eyes at his sister.

"You've decided something," he realised.

"I don't want to dabble," Erika said. "We don't, me or Ian. I know you're looking to bring Emi all the way in..."

"I would never do anything with her you were against," Jason said. "But whatever you may want, a day will come where she has to make her own choices. I think we both know how that's going to go and I want to give her every advantage."

"I know," Erika said. "That's why we've decided that we want to go all the way in too. If we're going to live lives of magic, we want to do it properly."

"We can make that work," Farrah said. "Monster hunting isn't for you, but we can set you up with support combinations. Jason has already picked out an essence set for you, based around magical cooking."

"Magical cooking?"

"Yep," Jason said. "I picked it up while I was away, so I get to teach you for once. You can be the world's first magic celebrity chef."

"Be serious, Jason."

"I am. The Network is going to be looking for ways to normalise magic, once it goes public. The idea of dimensional pockets full of monsters is going to freak people out. A TV chef making meals from ingredients taken from those same places will let them shift the narrative."

"You want me to be a propaganda tool?"

"How else do you expect to get through to people?" Jason asked. "Facts and reasoned argument?"

"Fair point," Erika acknowledged. "I take it you've made plans for Ian, then?"

"Ian's a doctor," Jason said. "There's no reason that has to change. The Network has been integrating healing magic and medical science for decades. We're looking to give him some healing powers and take him to the clinic I work at. They can teach him to incorporate magic with the skills and knowledge he already has."

"I think he'll like that," Erika said.

"I would have discussed it with him before this," Jason said, "but I didn't want to push you faster than you wanted to go."

“What about Emi?” Erika asked. “What plans do you have for her?”

“We don’t have anything set in stone,” Jason said. “It’ll probably be three years at least before she can receive magic, so we have plenty of time. We want a power set that doesn’t waste her cleverness and also keeps her safe.”

“There’s a combination we’ve been considering,” Farrah said. “It’s a known combination that uses magic to protect other people. Unlike most protection-type combinations, it’s more about standing back and directing events, rather than getting up close with enemies.”

“Why does she have to have enemies?” Erika asked.

“She doesn’t,” Jason said. “But she will. I think you know that.”

“She already wants to do what you do,” Erika said. “She should be too old to want to fight monsters when she grows up. It all still sounds ridiculous. Not many of your recordings had monsters in them. You mostly just talked about them a lot.”

“Did you show her the recording of you murdering the Geller kids?” Farrah asked.

“What?” Erika asked.

“I didn’t murder any kids,” Jason assured her, glaring at a grinning Farrah. “It was a combat trial in sort of a magic hologram arena. No one was hurt, let alone died. And you know I hate that recording, Farrah. I definitely didn’t bring it with me.”

“She hasn’t seen you fight, then?” Farrah asked.

“I’ve seen him fight,” Erika said softly.

Farrah felt the turbulence in Erika’s emotions and threw a questioning glance at Jason.

“There were a bunch of criminals that were forced out of Greenstone,” he explained. “They went out into the veldt and turned bandit. The Adventure Society did a sweep and my team was assigned with clearing out a village that they’d completely taken over. I did the job alone and my team recorded it.”

“You showed her a recording of you killing a bunch of people?” Farrah asked.

“You know how absurd what we do sounds to people from my world,” Jason told her. “I needed Erika to know the seriousness of what you and I do.”

“Don’t try and feed me crap,” Farrah said. “You didn’t have to jump all the way to a killing spree for that. You wanted someone to tell you that you weren’t a bad person, in spite of the things you’ve done. So here you go: you’re not a bad person. Gods, Jason, you don’t go showing normals things like that.”

“I needed her to understand who I am, now,” Jason said.



“Oh,” Farrah said, shaking her head. “I forgot who I’m talking to. You’re the guy who was lecturing me about killing when he had no damn idea what he was talking about. You don’t want to be told that you’re not a bad person; you want to be told that you are. Inside that twisted mind, you still haven’t balanced yourself out, have you?”

“I’ve killed a lot of people, Farrah.”

“A lot of people have it coming. You and I are going to talk about this later. At length.”

“I’m meant to be the one helping you,” Jason said.

“Clearly, I’m a lot more together as a person than you are,” she said.

“I won’t deny that,” Jason said.

“I should probably go,” Erika said, suddenly feeling sidelined.

“You haven’t told us what your decision was,” Jason said.

“Maybe now isn’t the time,” Erika said.

“You might as well tell us,” Farrah said. “If you’re waiting for this guy not to be caught up in self-indulgent introspection about how grimdark he is, it’ll never be the right time.”

“Grimdark?” Jason asked. “You need to stop watching movies with Taika and start watching them with Gordon.”

“And you need to make it through a whole conversation without it getting repeatedly derailed,” Farrah said.

“Coming from the woman who just accused me of excessive brooding.”

“Yeah, I’m just going to go,” Erika said.

“No,” Jason and Farrah said, turning on her.

“Sorry, Sis,” Jason said. “You’ve made an important decision and I want to hear it.”

“Alright,” Erika said nervously. “You intend to go back, don’t you? To the other world.”

Jason and Farrah shared a glance.

“Yeah,” Jason confirmed, “but we don’t know when or even if that will be possible.”

“Well,” Erika said, “when you do, we want to go with you.”

Jason opened his mouth to respond, then closed it again as the ramifications of his sister’s simple statement of intent played through his mind.

“Great,” Farrah said. “There’s a lot you should know before making a final choice like that, though. For one thing, we don’t know if or when we’ll ever come back here.”

“We’ve thought about that,” Erika said. “Ian doesn’t have any close family, and if Uncle Hiro’s plans work out, we can go without worrying about ours. I don’t love the idea of never seeing Dad again, but even so, we want to do it.”

Erika watched Jason’s expression, which held a deep frown.

"Farrah's right that there's a lot you need to know before even considering it," Jason said. "I've only seen a tiny fragment of that world myself and I've seen how dangerous it can be."

"Jason and I aren't important there, the way we are here," Farrah said. "We would be much less able to protect you."

"You can tell Ian and me all about it," Erika said. "I don't think we'll change our minds, though. We don't want to spend our lives in the house I grew up in. It was the comfort we needed after you died and Mum and Dad got divorced, but we always intended to show our daughter the world. It just turns out that the world is a lot bigger than we ever realised. If there's a magical world, we want to see it."

"This world will be getting more magical in the years to come."

"That's not the same and you know it," Erika said.

"Yeah," Jason admitted.

"If nothing else," Erika said, "Emi will want to go with you. I don't want to tell her she can't when I feel the same way, and I won't let you take my daughter away."

"I would never do that."

"I know," Erika said, shining a warm smile on Jason.

He stared at his sister for a long time, searching her face. He could feel the resolve permeating her aura.

"We can look into it," he said. "There's a ridiculous amount to go over, while we don't know if we even will find a way back. Even if we do, there's no telling if we can bring you along."

"If you can get back, the rest of us can," Farrah said. "All we have to do is trust you."

Jason looked at her for a moment, then nodded. He made a gesture and an archway rose from the floor.

"When I first showed you this," Jason said to Erika, "You couldn't go in."

"That goes to the special place that Emi talked about?" Erika asked.

"Yes," Jason said. "The only way in is to trust me completely. Back then, there were still a lot of mysteries surrounding me. You didn't understand what I'd been through or what I was doing since getting back. Now, you've seen all the recordings and asked me all your questions. So here's my question: can you trust your little brother?"

Erika stood up, reaching for the arch with a trepidatious hand. She inched it forward, but unlike the past, it didn't stop. Her finger passed into the darkness and vanished. She looked over at Jason, who gave her an encouraging nod. She stepped through.

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"This is really your soul?" Erika asked as they roamed through the gardens of Jason's spirit vault.

"A representation of it, anyway," Jason said. "Is it so hard to believe?"

"Not really," Erika said. "It's ostentatious and full of twisty paths."

"Oh, that's lovely," Jason said.

"To get in I have to trust you," Erika said. "Not put up with your nonsense."

They reached the edge of the garden, where the walls showed signs of battle damage, revealing an eerie darkness within. Erika ran a hand over a ragged gash in the dark brickwork, as if she could feel the brutal attack that made it.

"If you really want to go to the other world," Jason said softly, "then you have to understand that there will be dangers. Threats unlike anything in your world."

"You mean our world," Erika said.

"No," Jason said. "The brother who was a part of your world died. I belong somewhere else. If you want to as well, I'm willing to help you. Tomorrow we'll sit down with Ian and really talk about the ramifications of you doing this. Then we get onto essences. We need you as full of magic as we can get you."

Jason frowned, tilting his head. Since his transfiguration, his senses were able to extend outside the spirit vault and he sensed an aura approaching the houseboat.

"What is it?" Farrah asked.

"The painter," Jason said. "She's back."

Jason had Erika wait behind while Jason and Farrah left the spirit vault. They found the woman waiting on the dock, ruby hair shining in the moonlight.

"Are you a celestine in disguise?" Jason asked.

"I am," Dawn said. "Permission to come aboard?"

"Give me a moment," Jason said. "I need to deal with something."

"Perhaps you shouldn't portal your sister home," Dawn said. "I think you should let her know the stakes you're playing for."

## Chapter 334

### What You Have to Do

“Well,” Jason said, sitting around a table with three women. “This is complicated.”

“I may be getting used to being the most ignorant person in the room,” Erika said, “but that doesn’t mean that I like it.”

“How drunk are you?” Jason asked Farrah.

“I’m fine,” Farrah said, moving her head like she was trying to balance it on her neck.

“Me too,” Jason said. “I mean, yes, I wore a suppression collar to turn off my poison resistance, but I only drank that one bottle.”

“That’s two bottles,” Farrah said.

“Really? I thought I was seeing double.”

“Are you seeing two of anything else?” Farrah asked.

“No, but I think I might be bad at counting. Do you want me to sober you up? I have magic powers, you know.”

“No! There’s hardly any bronze-rank booze left.”

“You shouldn’t pay any attention to these two,” Erika confided loudly to Dawn.

“They’ve been drinking.”

“I think we should start by you telling us exactly who you are and why you’re here,” Jason said to Dawn. “Eri, we can catch you up on context later. Spoiler: she’s an alien.”

Dawn looked at Jason from under raised eyebrows.

“You’re weird,” Jason said. “Your aura is normal but there’s nothing in it. It’s like trying to eat a very realistic wax fruit, but that’s okay. I’m playing up being drunk so you underestimate me. I’m very clever.”

“You’re doing a really good job,” Farrah assured him.

“Thanks! So, who are you, lady?”

“What if I called myself a prophet?” Dawn asked.

“I could call myself Barry Van Dyke,” Jason said. “That doesn’t mean I replaced Jan Michael Vincent in the lead for the fourth series of Airwolf.”

“Really?” Erika asked. “You’re bringing up Airwolf?”

“Eri was not happy with the fourth season,” Jason confided.

“All the flight shots were reused footage,” Erika decried. “Why?”

“Eri, we’ve been over this. It was broadcast television in the eighties. They wanted enough episodes for a syndication deal on the cheap.”

“What about Caitlin, Jason? They blew up Ernest Borgnine’s body double, but what happened to Caitlin?”

“I told you: it was broadcast television in the eighties. They didn’t care about the female characters.”

“Am I meant to be following any of this?” Dawn asked.

“No, just ride it out,” Farrah advised. “Do you watch television?”

“No,” Dawn said.

“I’ve seen some Tina Turner concert recordings but otherwise I don’t see the appeal,” Farrah said. “Oh, they’ve jumped to Knight Rider; that usually means they’re winding down.”

“They brought Bonnie back,” Jason said.

“She never should have left,” Erika said.

“I’m not arguing that she should have,” Jason said. “I don’t hear you complaining about April, though.”

“April can bugger off.”

“She did,” Jason said. “You realise that she was an early female character who excelled in STEM fields,” Jason argued.

“So was Bonnie! Who they had her replace because Bonnie wasn’t blonde!”

“They brought her back,” Jason said. “The Hoff and Edward Mulhare were all ‘bring back that lady,’ and they did. Eddie Mulhare was a sexy-arse ghost.”

“He was a sexy-arse ghost,” Erika agreed.

Farrah interjected to try and bring things to a close.

“Maybe we should stop talking about nonsense, and talk to the weird magic woman instead.”

“Fine,” Erika complained, turning to Dawn. “So, what’s your deal. And no mysterious prophetess nonsense.”

“Agreed,” Jason said. “If you’re here to play enigmatic guide leading us forward through vague clues, you can get on your bike and trundle off.”

Dawn was taken slightly aback by the suddenly hostile brother-sister duo.

“You’ve already surmised who sent me,” Dawn said.

“Yep,” Jason said. “I’ve also surmised that your boss wants something.”

“It wants you to save the world,” Dawn said.

“From what?” Jason asked. “If the EOA’s built a weather machine, I’m one-hundred percent in.”

"I'm afraid it's more drastic than that," Dawn said. "A magical link has been forged between this world and Pallimustus."

"I'm just going to jump in real quick," Erika said. "Who exactly is this boss and what is Pallimustus?"

"She works for the World-Phoenix, who is basically an interdimensional super god," Jason said. "Pallimustus is the name of Farrah's world."

"Super god?" Erika asked.

"Yep," Jason said. "Regular gods are more along the lines of your Zeus, Thor, Brian Dennehy, etc."

"I don't think Brian Dennehy was a god," Erika said.

"Who am I thinking of then?" Jason asked.

"Bacchus?" Erika suggested.

"He did look like a man who enjoyed the odd sandwich," Jason said, then turned to Dawn, "Actually, since you're here, do you know if there are any local gods?"

"There isn't enough magic, yet," Dawn said.

"Yet?" Farrah asked.

"The link between worlds," Dawn said. "It's been siphoning off magic from Pallimustus to this world for centuries. It was slow, at first, but the rate of transfer has been rapidly escalating over the last century and a half."

"The proto-spaces," Jason said. "That's where they're coming from."

"Yes," Dawn said. "Each proto-space that breaks down without the anchor creatures being destroyed deposits its magic into your world. Individually that has little effect, but after centuries, the magical density of your world has started to rise. This strengthens the link, which feeds the loop. More spaces appear, collapse and dump even more magic into the environment at an ever-increasing pace."

"Someone knew this was coming," Jason said. "There were outworlders who built the grid and established the Network in preparation to stop it."

"That is our understanding," Dawn said. "However, they were unable to prepare a response to proto-spaces appearing coterminous with the depths of the oceans. The proto-spaces that open there go undetected and deliver magic into your world."

"Most of which is covered in water," Jason said. "Meaning that the Network's mission of containment was completely stuffed from the start."

"Yes," Dawn said. "What they have accomplished is to slow the rate at which your world's magical density has risen. For now, it remains low, but is approaching a dangerous threshold."

“The proto-spaces,” Jason said, eyes going wide. With the information Dawn had provided, his study of astral magic allowed him to connect the dots to form a terrible revelation.

“What is it?” Farrah asked him.

“I just realised what happens once the magical density crosses the minimum threshold for iron rank,” Jason said, making it Farrah's turn to be startled.

“No more proto-spaces,” she realised. “Direct magical manifestation.”

“There will most likely still be proto-spaces forming for the more powerful manifestations,” Dawn said. “Lower-rank monsters, essences and awakening stones will start manifesting directly, however. Once that begins, there will be no way to prevent the magic they bring with them from accelerating the rise in magical density even further.”

“I'm not following much of this,” Erika said. “From what I understand, though, you're saying our world is going to be more magical? Is that bad?”

“It's bad,” Jason said.

“Monsters randomly appearing in the streets,” Farrah said. “The societies of your world are not prepared for that.”

“That's not even the real problem,” Jason said. “Worlds aren't built to handle extreme changes in magical density. The dimensional membrane – that's the inbisible... inbivible... the thing you can't see that keeps the magic out. If that goes sploot, the whole planet gets washed away like a sandcastle when the tide comes in.”

“Wait,” Erika said. “You're saying the planet is going to be destroyed?”

“If we don't find a way to stop the magic coming in,” Jason said. “If we can trust what this lady is saying. I think she might not be real.”

“How long until that happens?” Erika asked.

“It's hard to be certain,” Dawn said. “The World Phoenix reinforced the dimensional membrane of your universe billions of years ago, which is how your world has endured thus far without overt effects. So long as the Network continues to intercept what proto-spaces they can, direct manifestation will begin in roughly a decade. The breaking down of the dimensional membrane will start causing weather effects at some point after that. Minor, at first, but conditions will escalate. Half a century from now, the geological effects will begin. The dimensional membrane will lose integrity entirely at around the two-hundred and fifty-year mark, but your planet will be uninhabitable for at least a century before that.”

“So, monsters on the streets in ten years,” Jason said. “Then it ramps up into a constant sequence of disaster movies and no more people in a century and a half.”

“Assuming nothing intervenes to move the clock one way or another,” Dawn said.

“What about that power your boss gave me?” Jason asked. “That stabilised physical realities, right?”

“That might work for a proto-space, Mr Asano. It won’t work for an entire planet.”

“Is it just the planet, or a whole universe thing?”

“Fortunately, the effects are localised,” Dawn said. “The likelihood of a chain reaction affecting the universe at large is very small.”

“Very small isn’t nothing,” Jason said. “We’re totally going to save the universe, which will totally get me some action. I’ll be all ‘hey, ladies, I’m the guy who saved the universe,’ and they’ll be all ‘that sounds like hot nonsense, but you’re way better looking than Kaito, so let’s make out.’ Then I’ll be all ‘I can’t do that; I respect women,’ and they’ll be all ‘it’s totally our choice.’ Since I’m all about female agency, I have to go along with it at that point because it’s the feminist thing to do, so we’ll go the supermarket and buy all the whipped cream...”

“Moving on from that grotesquery,” Farrah said, “you mentioned a link between worlds. Are we to assume that the link is both the cause and solution to the problem?”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “The link is predicated on the history of your two universes and the connection they have always shared. Allow me to explain. Your two universes, like all universes, were created from a seed, what you might know as a singularity. These seeds are created by the Builder.”

“Hold on,” Jason said. “I had a fistfight with the guy who created the universe?”

“What?” Erika asked.

“The Builder you know is not the Builder who created your universe. That Builder was sanctioned by the other great astral beings for treating your two universes as an experiment.”

“There’s a lot to unpack there,” Jason said. “Let’s start with what sanctioned means.”

“I don’t know,” Dawn said. “All I know is that for all intents and purposes, the old Builder is gone. A new one was then chosen from amongst the half-transcendents.”

“What’s a half-transcendent?” Jason asked. “Do you know what that is, Farrah?”

“Nope.”

“A half-transcendent is someone who has surpassed diamond-rank,” Dawn said.

“They have moved beyond the structures of power that you know of but they have yet to transcend physical being. That requires more than simply a growth in power. This is what the great astral beings provided, in return for the new Builder taking up the role of his predecessor.”



“What was that about treating our world as an experiment?” Erika asked. “I’m not sure I can express the degree to which I don’t like the sound of that.”

“The Builder’s role is to create universe seeds,” Dawn said. “Each one new and unique, which had been the case until your two universes. What he did was to not just create identical seeds, but to create them by reproducing elements of existing worlds. This does not literally translate to specific elements of those other worlds appearing in yours, but the potential is there. Think of it as having those elements built into the DNA of the universe. They may express themselves or they may not. If and when they do, it may be in very disparate ways. This is especially true given that one of the worlds was given a more rigid dimensional membrane, which is why your world has less magic than Pallimustus.”

“Are you saying we weren’t even the proper experiment?” Jason asked. “We were the control?”

“What’s DNA?” Farrah asked.

“It’s kind of like the magic matrix in your body,” Jason said. “Except instead of magic, it’s goop that gives you eyebeams when you fall in a vat of toxic waste.”

“I have no idea what that means,” Farrah said.

“People always say to that to me. And they keep telling me my name. I meet someone and they’re all ‘you’re Jason Asano.’ It’s like I’m a soap opera character that was presumed dead and then came back with amnesia and was played by a different actor.”

“It’s totally like that,” Erika said, laughing. “That makes a super amount of sense.”

Dawn ran a hand over her face.

“What it means,” she said, “is that the intrinsic elements that make up your world share certain traits inherited from other worlds. Take elves, for example. They have existed longer than either of your worlds, yet they appeared natively in both. In Pallimustus they evolved into one of the worlds natural, intelligent species, while on Earth they appeared in the form of myth and legend. This is true for many things.”

“I noticed that,” Jason said. “When I was in the other world, I was constantly surprised when things matched up to my old world. Elves are kind of like the way we count time of people.”

“I don’t know any elves,” Erika said, “but that sounded kind of racist.”

“Hey, I have lots of elf friends. Hold on, if the world just makes things happen, is that some kind of pre-destiny?”

“No,” Dawn said. “Think of it as a voice in the back of reality’s head, pushing it in certain directions. This largely affects things without agency, such as geological forces, which is why the two worlds have similar size and geography. It will affect people as well,

but this is extremely rare and always those who are susceptible, for whatever reason, to outside influence. Those who believe they see visions of the future or receive messages from a higher power. They are not, strictly speaking, incorrect. In a broad sense, at least. They have a habit of becoming invested in details largely conjured in their own minds.”

“Like how God hates gay people and poly-cotton blends,” Erika said.

“Something like that,” Dawn said.

“Are you following this okay?” Jason asked Erika.

“I think so,” Erika said. “It might go better if I hadn’t had so many cocktails.”

“Oh, hold on,” Jason said, then chanted a spell.

*“Feed me your sins.”*

Erika blinked as if she’d just stumbled into the light, shaking her head as the haziness of alcohol was drained away. Then she gave Jason a flat look.

“Feed me your sins?” she asked.

“So overdramatic,” Farrah said.

“It’s the chant for my spell,” Jason said. “I didn’t get to pick it.”

“They have a habit of becoming invested in details largely conjured in their own minds,” Dawn said pointedly.

“Bloody women,” Jason said. “I need to start hanging out with some dude-bros. I bet Kaito knows some.”

“You would hate hanging out with dude-bros,” Erika said. She got up and went behind the bar to mix herself another cocktail, now that she’d sobered up.

“No, it’ll be great,” Jason insisted. “I’m turning over a new leaf. I’m going to start talking about my man-cave and asking people how much they lift. It’ll be less than me because I’m super strong. Women are objects!”

“Might I remind you two that we’re talking about the end of the world?” Farrah said pompously.

“And banter is how we save it,” Jason said. “Have you not seen a superhero movie? There’s a big sky-beam or a magic rock and we win through the power of quips.”

“I saw one,” Farrah said. “It seemed to hinge on people’s mothers having the same name. It may be because I’m from another universe, but it seemed like several hours of nonsensical rubbish.”

“Wait, that’s the superhero movie Taika showed you?” Jason asked. “I’m going to have a serious talk with that man.”

“You leave Taika alone,” Erika said. “He’s lovely.”

“He thinks Team Knight Rider is the best one,” Jason said.

“Okay, we need to stage an intervention,” Erika said as she finished making her cocktail, immediately drained half of it and started making another one. “Anyone else want one?”

Dawn looked at them like they were monkeys throwing their own poop.

“This is who the World-Phoenix is relying on to save the world,” she muttered.

“It’s fine,” Farrah assured her. “The day I met Jason, he saved my whole team pretty much by acting like this. So, how are we meant to save the world, exactly?”

“That’s a good point,” Jason said. “Emi thinks I’m a superhero, which is super adorable. I pretty much have to save the world now.”

“Around half a millennia ago,” Dawn said, “an outworlder came from this world to Pallimustus and fell into the service of a Pallimustus deity. When he acquired the means to return to his own world, he came back with tools and a mission from that deity. He set up a global magical infrastructure that would strengthen the bond between the two worlds. Over the centuries, more and more of the magic building up on Pallimustus was siphoned into this world.”

“The monster surges,” Farrah said. “That’s why they’ve been taking longer and longer. The magic that fuels them has been siphoned off to here, which siphons more and more as the dimensional membrane weakens.”

“What does that accomplish?” Jason asked.

“The current Builder is the original source of the magic techniques through which the link was strengthened,” Dawn said. “He passed that knowledge along to the deity behind all this. Much of which is now in your hands, Mr Asano.”

“I get it,” Jason said. “As soon as that knowledge entered Pallimustus, the goddess of knowledge had access to it. She found a reason to pass it to me, knowing that I would inevitably get home where I could do something about it.”

“The link is a threat to Pallimustus as well,” Dawn said, “but of a different nature. The delay in the monster surges also destabilises that world’s dimensional membrane. The longer the delay, the more dangerous the things that can finally make it through.”

“You’re talking about an increase in diamond-rank manifestations during the monster surge,” Farrah said.

“That is only a by-product,” Dawn said. “The goal is...”

“The invasion of Pallimustus,” Jason said. “Like your painting.”

“Yes. The god Purity has struck a bargain with the Builder. Purity lays the groundwork for the Builder and the Builder helps Purity cleanse the world of what Purity has come to

see as the unclean elements. The Builder takes the world's abundant astral spaces and leaves Purity to rebuild civilisation in his own image."

"That's insane," Farrah said. "The other gods won't stand for it."

"There was already some kind of religious council formed to deal with the church of Purity when I left," Jason said.

"Purity has long made preparations in secret," Dawn said. "The church is more prepared than anyone realises, except for Knowledge. That goddess has likewise been making secret preparations to combat Purity."

"Why not just warn everyone?" Farrah asked.

"She has rules," Jason said. "I'm pretty sure telling everyone would be such a huge deal that it violates her central tenets. She's big on people learning things for themselves"

"Exactly right," Dawn said. "Transcendent beings are power incarnate but they have limitations that do not bind us physical beings. The most she can do is prepare to act once the knowledge is widespread. When the invasion begins and Purity reveals his hand in full, so shall she."

"So, our part is to find this link enhancer and shut it down," Farrah said.

"Yes," Dawn said. "You have the tools."

"I can learn the astral magic, given enough time," Jason said. "How are we meant to find this link biggerer?"

"She said a global magic infrastructure," Farrah said to Jason. "Sound familiar?"

"The Network's grid," Jason said.

"Even if the two aren't connected," Farrah said, "I'll bet we can use one to find the other. Once you figure out what it is we're looking for."

"I was already hitting the books," Jason said. "I don't have to change anything there. I definitely haven't been slacking off to read Farrah's sex magic book, especially not the thing on page 41 with the chilled fruit."

"This world is doomed," Dawn muttered.

"It'll be fine," Jason said. "I'm great at fighting evil. I mean, did I hurt the bad guy? No. Did he kill me? Yes, he did. But we won! Will I get credit? Probably not. All the women will be like 'hey, Humphrey, your shoulders are obviously so large because of a glandular condition, but we're totally into that.' Then Humphrey will be all 'sorry, gaggle of women, but I have to mourn my even more handsome friend,' and they'll be all 'hey, we're super ready to comfort you,' and he'll be all 'well, I suppose my handsome friend did show me how to whip cream.' Then they'll go off to a local purveyor of dairy goods and..."

"I think I can feel myself becoming lactose intolerant," Erika said.

"I think it may be time to go," Dawn said. You now know the task ahead of you and the agenda of the World-Phoenix that has been concerning you. All she wants is to protect your world, and for you to be her instrument."

"Was that a knob joke?" Jason asked.

"No," Dawn said. "Now that events surrounding your return have largely settled, it was time to show you the path forward. It's possible my timing was not ideal."

"It's fine," Jason said. "To be honest, I'd be way more suspicious sober."

"When we're done, can the World-Phoenix send us home?" Farrah asked.

"The objective is also the reward," Dawn said. "You will return home before your task is done."

"Well, this is a sobering conversation," Jason said. "Literally; I think I do need another drink. Dawn, you don't know anywhere I can stock up on bronze-rank booze, do you? I'm running low. Actually, at this point, I need to start in on the silver-rank stuff. I don't want to go collaring myself every time I drink. I lost the key for a while. It was in the component bowl with the sheep tokens, which is why it took me so long to find. Nobody wants sheep."

Dawn shook her head.

"There's an alchemist in the Network's Stuttgart branch," she said. "I'm sure your Network allies can make a connection."

"Oh, nice," Jason said. "Thanks, dimensional space lady."

"You know what you have to do, now," Dawn said.

"Sure," Jason said. "I would like to know why you don't do it yourself, though."

"Several reasons," Dawn said. "For one thing, there are rules about how much the great astral beings and their higher agents can intervene in physical realities. If the World-Phoenix had servants native to this world it would be possible, but this world does not produce high-rankers. Also, you see how little power I have."

"I thought you were just hiding it," Farrah said.

"If I were here in person, the disparity between my power and the lack of magic in this world would be crippling, spirit coins or not. This is only an avatar I am projecting from outside your reality. You lack the knowledge to understand how impressive that is, so let me assure you that the answer is very. Even if either I or my dimensional vessel breached the dimensional membrane of your world, in its delicate state, the raw power would be like dropping a stone on a pane of glass. The best I can do is share knowledge."

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As Jason and Farrah were showing Dawn off the houseboat, Dawn paused on the lower deck before stepping onto the dock.

“May I ask a question for my own edification, Mr Asano?”

“Go for it,” Jason said.

“You knew the vessel that the Builder took in Pallimustus, yes?”

“Actually, there were two and I knew them both,” Jason said. “The first I didn’t know well, although he did knock me unconscious with a shovel several times.”

“That guy?” Farrah asked.

“Yep,” Jason said. “The second was Thadwick, who I knew a bit better. Dated his sister for a while. I did, I mean, not him. That would be weird. Why do you ask?”

“When great astral beings interact with physical beings, or even each other, they use living vessels,” Dawn explained. “Unlike temporary, lower-rank vessels, long-term vessels such as myself do not burn out. The astral being can possess and release us harmlessly many times, over many years. It takes decades, often centuries before the strain threatens permanent damage and a new vessel must be arranged.”

“Sure,” Jason said.

“One of the side effects of inhabiting physical bodies is that the astral beings have to operate by the same means the bodies do,” Dawn said. “The result is that we vessels shape the behaviour of the great astral beings while they inhabit us. Permanent vessels are carefully chosen, while temporary vessels pose a choice. Either sacrifice a follower who thinks exactly the way they want their followers to think, or use an expendable vessel.”

“Ooh,” Jason said. “That explains why the Builder was such a tool bag.”

“In the case of very strong personalities,” Dawn said, “rapidly switching from one vessel to the next can create a lingering effect, where the first vessel’s personality affects the second one.”

“I think I see where this is going,” Jason said with a chortle.

“Those of us who serve as vessels like to stay in touch because there are few who truly understand our experiences,” Dawn said. “My friend Shako is the primary vessel of the Builder in this region of the cosmos, as I am for the World-Phoenix. He described his last experience of being the Builder’s vessel like having a toddler running around in his head making all the decisions. I was curious as to what manner of man was the vessel that prompted such a reaction.”

“He was the worst,” Jason said. “Literally the worst. There's a guy punching a baby who's all 'take that, baby,' yet can still console himself with not being Thadwick. Thadwick

sold out his friends, his family and his entire world. That guy sucked. His whole family did, to be honest, except for his mum and his sister, but a bloke doesn't kiss and tell. His sister, I mean. I didn't sleep with his mum, although she's very attractive. Like, very, but she does have the silver-rank thing going on."

"That's quite enough information, thank you," Dawn said. "The issue of the vessel was a matter of some curiosity in our little circle."

"Can I ask you a question?" Jason said.

"Certainly," Dawn said.

"You seem to know a lot," Jason said. "Did you know that Farrah was in this world and where to find her?"

"Ah," Dawn said, letting out a wincing sigh. "Yes, but..."

Jason's fist crashed into her nose, sending her crashing over the rail and into the water.

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"Yeah, she's definitely dead," Jason said. Using his cloak's weight-lowering power he was standing on the water over her corpse.

"You killed her?" Erika asked in horror.

"This was just an avatar projection," Jason said. "I doubt I could hurt her actual self with a magic rocket launcher."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to loot her," Jason said. "She should have told me about you."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea," Farrah said.

Jason reached down and touched the floating body. He then walked back to the houseboat as the corpse dissolved into rainbow smoke behind him. Erika, never having seen it other than in projections, watched with a mix of fascination and horror.

- 
- 10 [Diamond Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 100 [Gold Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 1,000 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 10,000 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 100,000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 

"Ooh, jackpot."

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On a dimensional ship within the astral void, a ruby-haired woman shook her head in disbelief.

"That little fuc..."

## Chapter 335

### The Direction We Want Them to Go

"You can't just go around killing people," Erika said.

She stood next to Farrah as Jason stepped off the surface of the water, rainbow smoke rising up behind him.

"If you're going to go back with us to my world," Farrah said, "Then you'll have to learn the same lessons that he did. Starting with yes, he can just go around killing people."

"That wasn't a person," Jason said. "It was a projection. I didn't kill her so much as smash her phone."

"That's still not cool," Erika said.

"She knew that I was being tortured and could have told Jason on the day we arrived," Farrah said. "The next time I see her, I might punch her nose through her brain."

"You know what is cool?" Jason asked. "Sleepy time."

"We have a lot to talk about," Erika said.

"We have a lot to sleep off," Jason said. "Tomorrow, Sis."

"Don't go thinking you can skip out on that," Erika warned.

"Sure," Jason said. "Stay here so I can't slink off. I'll portal in your husband and aggressive strain of hugging vine."

"Emi will be in bed by now," Erika said.

Jason gave her a flat look and opened up a portal. Moments later, a pyjama-clad rocket flew out to grab Jason in a hug.

"What's that smell?" Emi asked, wrinkling her nose the lingering scent of rainbow smoke. "It's super nasty."

"It's your mum," Jason said. "She's been concealing it all this time through an unhealthy overuse of scented hand soaps, but now her secret's out."

"Don't be mean to Mum, Uncle Jason," Emi scolded. "She looks cranky. What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," Jason asserted, throwing out his arms, indignantly. "Maybe we talked about Airwolf a little."

"Which season?" Emi asked in the tone of a drill instructor as he handed a recruit just enough rope.

"Fourth," Jason mumbled

"What was that?" Emi asked.

"Fourth," Jason reluctantly confessed.



“What were you thinking?”

“I had a lot to drink.”

“That’s no excuse,” Emi scolded. “Really, what is that smell. It’s like an animal died inside a slightly larger animal.”

“It was a magic phone lady I broke,” Jason said.

“Okay. Can we stay here tonight?”

“Yes,” Erika said. “Go get your dad.”

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In the sober light of morning, the previous night’s revelations played through Jason’s head. His spirit attribute had improved his memory to the point that even magical alcohol didn’t impair it, at least of his own rank. If it was brewed from silver-rank ingredients, the story could easily change. He had no hangover, as his recovery attribute was more than up to the task of refreshing him over the course of a night’s sleep.

On the top deck of the houseboat, all the current occupants were sitting around a table sharing a buffet breakfast courtesy of Jason. Erika was a little too seedy for extravagant morning cookery. Ian and Emi, Farrah, Hiro and Taika rounded out the group.

“So,” Jason said. “It looks like we have to save the world. It seemed hilarious a few drinks in, but all of a sudden we’re responsible for seven billion people.”

“What do you mean by save the world?” Ian asked.

“What do you mean by we?” Erika asked. “Fighting evil seems like more of a you job. I might cater, but I’ll leave confronting the forces of darkness to you.”

“Just to be clear, are we seriously talking about saving the world?” Ian asked. “That’s not a metaphor or something, right.”

“Nope,” Jason said. “Literally save the world.”

“From what?” Ian asked. “Climate change?”

“Something like that,” Jason said. “It’s like an extra, additional climate change that will eventually wipe out the planet. Basically, some bad guys in an alternate universe are doing something that is slowly destroying our world as a knock-on effect.”

“Destroying the world is collateral damage?” Hiro asked.

“To these guys, yeah,” Jason said. “I’ve fought them before. They’ve killed thousands. They killed Farrah.”

All eyes turned to Farrah.

“What?” she asked. “If you’re going to come back from the dead, you have to die of something, first. I’ll get mine back by stopping what they’re doing.”

“How long do we have before the world ends?” Hiro asked.

"Years," Jason said. "Quite a lot of years, but the longer we take, the more damage we can't take back."

"So, what do we do?" Taika asked.

"It's a marathon, not a sprint," Jason said. "It's going to take me years to learn the magic involved properly."

"It seems crazy," Ian said and Jason laughed.

"You should see it from my perspective. I mean, I have a healthy ego, but surely there has to be someone better, right?"

"Why is it you?" Hiro asked. "Why not someone else?"

"Because the full answer isn't here," Farrah said. "We were told that we would need to return to my world before the task was done."

"We're talking about decoupling worlds," Jason said. "We're the ones with the tools, the knowledge and the experience of walking both worlds."

"Sounds like there isn't someone better," Hiro said.

"I think its awesome," Emi said.

"Of course you do," Jason said. "You're twelve."

"Let's face it, Jason," Erika said. "So are you."

"I did think it was awesome," Jason admitted. "Now that I've sobered up, I'm just terrified. I can't get my head around the responsibility. Two years ago, before I went away, would any of you have wanted me to be the one responsible for every life on Earth? That's the kind of thing they put your face on the money for and I am not the guy whose face you put on the money."

Farrah took a spirit coin from her pocket and slid it across the table, with the image of Jason on it face up.

"Rufus would trust you with that responsibility," she said. "We met you almost two years ago and he knew immediately that you could be great."

"Immediately? You mean when the cannibals had us in those cages and instead of escaping I was hit upside the head with a shovel?" Jason asked.

"Maybe not immediately," Farrah conceded. "But from the first day. You saved all our lives."

"He did?" Erika asked. "Jason, you were always kind of vague about events before your recordings started."

Emi picked up the coin and peered at it.

"Uncle Jason, this has your old chin."

"He never told you the story of how we met?" Farrah asked.

“He said you all escaped some cannibal cult together.”

“Yes,” Farrah said. “I’ve seen some things in my career, but nothing like that kitchen.”

“Maybe skip that particular detail at breakfast,” Jason said with a shudder as he recalled the horrifying image of the Vane Estate kitchen.

“I think you’re right,” Farrah said. “I’ll take you through events from the beginning, at least from my perspective. For me, it started when my team was hired to investigate this family of reclusive aristocrats, living out in the middle of the desert...”

\*\*\*

Jason had fed enough magic quintessence into his cloud flask that the houseboat could produce a more-than-adequate ritual room. Combined with the vortex accumulator gathering magic, it made for a space of balanced ambient magic, ideal for conducting rituals.

It also had an adjacent room with enclosed shower stalls for post-ranking-up needs. Water infused with crystal wash sprayed not just from above but all around, making for a cleaning experience second only to an undiluted supply of crystal wash.

Jason drew out the diagram for the essence ritual with a stick of chalk, the room allowing him to do so with minimal adjustments for ambient magic. Once again, Jason appreciated how good it was to have Clive making the same thing possible in the middle of the wilderness using his abilities.

Hiro, Ian and Erika looked like it was laundry day, wearing a selection of old and faded ultra-casual wear. Jason had made it clear that whatever they were wearing, they wouldn’t want to wear it ever again. Emi was giggling at them as she stood out of the way with Farrah.

Mostly, though, Emi’s attention was on the party interface Jason had given them all access to. Emi’s status screen allowed them to realise that Jason’s power would let them know when Emi could safely absorb essences, saving them from a periodic, if cheap and simple testing ritual.

“So,” Jason asked. “Who goes first?”

Hiro and Ian both turned to Erika.

“Oh, great,” she said.

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “I’ve done this before, Farrah’s done this before and it’s a nice, safe ritual.”

Jason picked up one of the nine essences on a table beside him and led his sister to the middle of the ritual circle, avoiding the lines and the small piles of spirit coins. He handed her the essence.

---

Item: [Feast Essence] (unranked, uncommon)

*Manifested essence of bountiful consumption (consumable, essence).*

- Requirements: Less than 4 absorbed essences.
- Effect: Imbues 1 awakened feast essence ability and 4 unawakened feast essence abilities.
- You have absorbed 0/4 essences. Once absorbed, an essence cannot be relinquished or replaced.

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“We’re starting with the feast essence,” Jason told her, “because we’ve chosen the order to do the best job of setting your powers in the direction we want them to go.”

Jason and Farrah had debated the relative merits of the common feast essence versus the higher-rarity hunger essence. Hunger was the more popular of the two because it had a stronger combat role, often producing an arsenal of drain attacks. For this reason, they had gone with the more broadly-ascpected feast essence, given the goal was a power set built around cooking magic.

“In isolation, for example,” Jason explained, “the knife essence, which is next, could very easily give you some mundane special attack. With a feast essence under your belt, though, that next power is more likely to go in the direction we want.”

“There aren’t any guarantees, however,” Farrah said. “We can try and guide the direction for the powers you get, but being too rigid will only backfire.”

Although they had already seen Taika go through the process, Jason’s family watched with fascination as Jason conducted the ritual and the essence cube melted, sinking into Erika’s flesh.

- 
- You have absorbed [Feast Essence]. You have absorbed 1 of 4 essences.
  - Progress to iron rank: 25% (1/4 essences).
  - [Feast Essence] has bonded to your [Recovery] attribute, changing your [Recovery] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all feast essence abilities to increase your [Recovery] attribute.
  - You have awakened the feast essence ability [Feeding the Multitudes]. You have awakened 1 of 5 feast essence abilities.

Ability: [Feeding the Multitude] (Feast)

- Conjunction (boon).

- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): You can replicate an amount of food up to a plate's worth. Mana cost increases with each replication of the same food, with the cost significantly reduced if the food was prepared by you personally. The taste of the food is identical to the original but nourishment and magical effects can only be copied by expending a spirit coin for each perfect duplication. You can replicate food made with normal or iron-rank ingredients, with the appropriate rank of spirit coin required for true replication.

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“Right in the sweet spot,” Jason said. “That’s exactly the kind of power we’re looking for.”

- 
- Human racial ability [Essence Gift] has evolved to [Gourmet & Gourmand].

Ability: [Gourmet & Gourmand]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].
- Your senses of taste and smell are enhanced. You may have an additional enhancement effect from magical food without negative effect. You process the remnant magic from potions at an accelerated rate, allowing you to safely consume further potions of the same type after a shorter delay.

---

Jason and Farrah shared a glance. They immediately recognised that Erika's abilities were both heavy on resource consumption, a risk Farrah had warned of when they chose the feast essence. In the other world, it would not have been a problem. On Earth, she would be deeply reliant on Jason to supply her with what she would need. If her awakenings continued in this vein, it would add a new wrinkle to the discussion over Erika's family joining them on the return to Pallimustus.

The ritual room balanced out the magic as Jason cleared the ritual circle and drew a fresh one. Erika's remaining essences were absorbed one after another, with results in line with what they were hoping for.

“As long as we aren't too specific with our objectives,” Farrah said, “organising a general direction for powers isn't that hard.”

“Clive told me much the same thing,” Jason said.

From the knife essence, Erika gained the power to conjure multiple knives of various types, from combative to culinary in purpose. From the dance essence, she gained the power to telekinetically control small objects and the ability to split her concentration over

them. Her confluence essence, bounty, gave her the power to imbue ordinary food with magical effects.

“How do you feel?” Jason asked as her confluence essence appeared and was absorbed.

“Amazing,” Erika said. “I feel like I could run a marathon.”

As soon as she said it, her face was stricken with a startled and queasy expression. Jason and Farrah pointed at the shower room door and she bolted for it. Ian moved to go after her and Jason stopped him.

“You may not want to see your wife like that.”

“She’s my wife and she probably needs me,” Ian said. “It doesn’t matter how I see her.”

They watched Ian follow into the shower room, hearing some very unpleasant sounds emerge during the short moment the door was open.

“He’s a good husband,” Farrah said.

“Yep,” Jason said. “He’s one of the good ones, alright.”

Jason then turned to Hiro.

“Alright, Uncle,” he said. “Looks like you’re up.”

## Chapter 336

### The Dangers of What I Do

“I have some mixed feeling about this essence,” Jason said, turning the translucent cube over in his hands.

They were still in the ritual room. Hiro's essences had been done and they had moved onto Ian. It was the third essence for Ian's combination after they had already imbued him with the first two.

Jason had kept the renewal essence that Taika declined, and given that Ian was a doctor, healing seemed the obvious power set to aim for. There were many potential healer combinations, each one fitting a specific niche. As Ian was not looking for the role of combat medic but a more traditional doctor role, Farrah had suggested a specific combination.

“There's a popular combination that is the first choice for a behind-the-lines healer for anyone who can get their hands on a renewal essence,” she explained. “You don't see adventurers using it because it largely avoids combat powers unless you pick the right kind of awakening stones.”

The renewal essence was first, then the life essence. The third was one that gave Jason pause.

“The pure essence,” he said, continuing to stare at it as he turned it over again and again in his hands. “It has some specific connotations for me.”

“I know,” Farrah said. “I've seen your recordings. The church of Purity turned out to be evil.”

“There was something not in the recordings,” Jason said. “It was right near the end and I didn't put it in. The others didn't see her because it was before I started recording, but you remember Anisa, of course.”

“Yeah,” Farrah said.

“Who's Anisa?” Erika asked, looking up from where she was running her fingers over her skin. After recovering from ranking up to iron, she was revelling in the new sensations of being a magical being. Hiro was still in the shower room, while Erika, Ian and Emi had been joined by Ken, who had arrived to watch for himself. He was still uncertain about getting in on the strange magic powers.

“Remember I told you about when my team first met Jason,” Farrah said. “The priestess guiding us was named Anisa and she was part of the church of Purity.”

“You shouldn’t trust people who talk about purity too much,” Erika said. “Take your eyes off them and suddenly they’re rounding people up into camps.”

“That’s what I said,” Jason agreed.

“I didn’t care for Anisa,” Farrah said. “I’m not sure Rufus needed to kick her out, but she was not a good person to work with. Did she turn out to be one of the bad ones when the church of Purity turned out to be corrupt?”

“Yes,” Jason said, sparing a glance at Emi while deciding whether to continue. “She turned out to be a chief henchwoman and we ended up fighting her in the astral space.”

“What happened?” Farrah asked.

“We won,” Jason said. “She was with her boss at the time, who was a silver-rank essence user. We knew he’d be very hard to deal with, so we decided to... handle Anisa first.”

“Oh no,” Emi said. “I’m only twelve and have no idea what an obvious euphemism is.”

“Emi,” Jason said, “there’s a time for being serious.”

Everyone in the room turned to look at Jason.

“What?” he asked.

“You fought the silver-ranker, after?” Farrah asked. “How was that?”

“Hard,” Jason said. “Nothing like the chump they sent after me here and even that guy beat me. He was a healer, so between his silver-rank toughness and his powers, he was damn near immortal. That did mean he didn’t have as much attack power to throw at us and even then our front liners had trouble holding on. We’re getting sidetracked, though. The point is this pure essence, not some dead archbishop of Purity.”

“It’s not a divine essence,” Farrah said. “It’s got nothing to do with the god, despite the name.”

“I know,” Jason said. “I can’t help but hesitate, though.”

“Okay, I’m starting to feel concerned,” Ian said. “If you were going to hesitate, I’d really prefer you’d have done it before we were halfway through.”

“I’m sorry,” Jason said. “This is completely the right choice; it’s just my hang-up. I don’t normally know the people I...”

He frowned.

“Enough of that. Let’s get you some more magic powers!”

Ian’s essences were soon complete and he made a beeline for the shower room, Hiro already having left.

“How much crystal wash did you put into the flask?” Farrah asked.



“Enough to last a few years, so long as I’m careful,” Jason said. “Dad and Emi get to rank up here, but the others can use their own showers.”

“That gunk will be hard to clear off with regular soap and water.”

“That’s a fair point,” Jason said. “I’ll buy them some steel wool.”

Jason and Farrah’s phones simultaneously beeped with messages. They both looked at their screens, then shared a glance.

“We’ll have to postpone the rest of the magic talk,” Jason said to Erika and Hiro. “I know that the timing isn’t great, but it’s a category three, which means all hands on deck. In the meantime, stay on the boat and take a rest. There’s a big lunch spread set up in the lounge.”

“First, though,” Farrah said, “You eat like an essence user.”

She handed Erika and Hiro a spirit coin each.

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Monsters swarmed through the uneven, bushland scrub. They crawling out from gullies, over ridges and through dense patches of prickly vegetation. They took the form of bugs, from giant beetles to horrifying desert mantises to things with no Earthly counterpart. Millipede-like creatures, except that instead of a singular body, five bodies spread out from a central hub, like the limbs of a starfish. Each body-limb ended in an acid-spitting mouth with gnashing mandibles. They weren’t quick but they were the size of trampolines and hard to approach without being intercepted by acid spit.

The silver rank monsters were low, flat and dark-shelled, like scorpions. They lacked pincers, each instead boasting a trio of over-long scorpion tails that ended not in piercing barbs but raking claws. The tails could reach out twice the length of their bodies, which were roughly the size of a mattress.

They were not agile, but their raw speed was in the mid-range of silver rank, making them hard for Jason to pin down. Their hard shells made penetrating them difficult, so even if a hit landed, his special attacks only worked if damage got through. For this reason, he pulled his sword out rather than conjure his dagger.

The sword Gary made, Dread Salvation, was designed to help Jason in his most troubling fights. For every hit that landed, only for the target to be immune via impenetrable armour, the sword built up a charge of resonating-force. That damage type was ideally suited to getting through armour, doing extra damage and resonating through. Jason gave up the afflictions of his conjured dagger, but the numerous creatures were weak for silver-rank monsters.

Weak silver-rank fortitude was still silver-rank fortitude, however. It took every affliction he could lay on to deal with them, but his spells were fortunately much easier to land. With only a few ranged monsters spitting poison barbs or acidic bile, there was little to interrupt him.

Even with his sword, the trick was landing hits on the speeding swarms. Although their patterns were simple, their pace was a major threat to Jason as he faced them like a bullfighter. He took a number of brutal hits before he started to master the timing. The advantage of the burst attack nature of the creatures was that Jason had time to recover.

Now he was solidly into the mid-range of bronze, his toughness was much improved. More effective was the increased power of Colin's regeneration and the health drain of his Leech Bite special attack. His power to drain afflictions and convert them into stamina and mana kept him going when other parts of the Network's forces were forced to bow out.

Jason was only part of the response team. Farrah's peak bronze-rank speed attribute and sweeping attacks with her telescoping magma sword gave her the edge to sweep through whole clusters. Although her reflexes were up to the task, her mobility was lacking and the monsters were left trying to overwhelm her powerful armour. Like Jason, they were ill-suited to punching through a hard shell.

Jason and Farrah each had their own challenges to overcome in the fight. Farrah's challenge was to hold as much mana in reserve as she could to last out the fight. This meant largely sticking to her sword, but her immobility would sometimes lead multiple groups of the silver-rank monsters to converge. At that stage, she was forced to spend as little mana as she could fending them off as efficiently as possible with her costly powers.

The outworlders were used to being the stars of the show, but in this instance, it was the Network teams that were truly stepping up. Their disciplined, focus-fire attacks surprised Jason and Farrah with their effectiveness against the silver-rankers. Against the hordes of lower-ranked monsters, the Network's tactics demonstrated why the organisation put so much stock in them. The hordes were swept away with an efficiency that neither Jason nor Farrah could have matched, even with their whole teams present.

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Jason had his shredded combat armour pegged up on the rear deck of the houseboat, hosing off the blood. The monster blood was long gone but Jason's remained. It would disappear itself into rainbow smoke after being away from his body for an hour or so, but he'd rather have it gone from his outfit by then.

Ian and Erika found him, no shirt, hosing off the ragged remains of the outfit. The crest tattoo covering his back was in full display, as were his torso scars.

"I know girls like scars, Jason," Erika said, her light tone not entirely masking her concern, "but that might be a bit much."

"I know, right?" Jason replied. "I finally get some ab definition and it looks like someone scribbled all over them."

"What's that thing?" Ian asked, indicating the armour. "Is it the hide of some monster?"

"It's made from monster hide," Jason said. "It's my armour. You've seen me wear it."

"Wait," Erika said. "That's your armour?"

"Yep."

"The armour you wear?"

"That's how armour works."

"It's cut to ribbons," she said.

"It was a rough one," Jason acknowledged. "Farrah's already meditating on it to consolidate her gains. I'll join her, once I'm done here."

"Were you wearing the armour when that happened to it?" Ian asked.

"I'm fine," Jason said. "Look at me; no new scars."

"Isn't armour meant to withstand attacks like that?"

"Yeah," Jason said, "but so am I."

Erika looked over her brother, who was, himself, dripping wet. The water at his bare feet was stained red.

"I'm not foolish enough to try and make you stop," Erika said. "I don't want Emi catching you all bloody and hurt, though."

"Me either," Jason said. "Not until she's older, has essences of her own and needs a lesson in the dangers of what I do. Shade is entertaining her at the other end of the boat."

"Are you going to survive until Emi is that old?" Erika asked.

"This is the way I fight, Eri. It's bloody and grim and you want no part of it."

"But our daughter will," Ian said.

"She won't fight like me," Jason said. "I'll make sure her powers reward her attentiveness and quick-thinking. She'll be all about keeping herself and others safe."

"I do like the sound of that," Ian said. "The sound I like better is her finding a nice man to stay home and raise our grandkids while she's a high-flying doctor, overpaid economic consultant or whatever else she wants."

"You might find she's better off in the other world," Jason said. "All of you may be. The other world has its dangers, yes, but that danger is a known quantity. This world will soon be going through a period of upheaval and we don't know what dangers we'll be dealing with."

"Who knows," Jason said. "What I do might seem exciting, but maybe something else will capture her imagination."

"More than being an interdimensional superhero," Erika said. "Sure."

"That'll do," Jason said, turning off the hose. "It took bit of a beating, so it probably won't come right until tomorrow."

"That thing self-repairs?" Ian asked.

"All good light armour self-repairs," Jason said. "It costs more but savings in avoided repairs more than pay it back. Heavy stuff is harder to make self-repair, and mine does operate faster than normal because it's partly made from hydra skin."

"Like the twelve tasks of Heracles hydra?"

"Heracles fought a river hydra," Jason said. "My armour has marsh hydra skin, but they're very similar breeds. A river hydra was actually the first monster I fought after coming back to earth."

"As I recall," Ian said, "even Heracles had some trouble with that," Ian said. "It was one of the tasks that were discounted because he had help."

"I don't know what to tell you," Jason said. "I did it solo, so I guess Heracles is a scrub."

"He was the son of Zeus."

"Well, I'm the son of Cheryl, and I know which one I'd bet on in a scrap. I mean, Zeus, obviously; the bloke chucks lightning. But still, Mum is quite stern."

"Zeus isn't real, is he?" Ian asked.

"Nope," Jason said. "I was talking to this..."

He trailed off as he sensed a surge of magic from above, where Farrah was meditating. He chortled as he used his bronze-rank prowess and parkour skills to swiftly clamber up the outside of the houseboat. From the roof deck, silver light was already brightly shining.

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"Congratulations," Jason said, tossing Farrah a bottle. As Farrah tipped the crystal wash over her head where it started methodically coating her body, the foul ichor splattered over the top deck was already being absorbed and cleansed by the houseboat.

“That is a foul smell, even by rank-up standards,” Jason said. “I don’t know if that’s a higher-rank thing or a first rank-up after becoming an outworlder thing.”

“You did pump out a lot of foul muck that first time,” Farrah said. “How was bronze-rank for you?”

“Normal.”

“I know we’re meant to be teaching your family about aura senses and the rest of the things a new iron-ranker needs to know,” Farrah said. “I need to meditate and consolidate this rank, though, so I’ll have to leave that to you.”

Farrah was talking with a huge grin on her face. Despite saying she was going to rest and meditate, what she did was throw her hands up and out in front of her, aimed out over the side of the roof deck.

*“Burning heart of the world, show your might.”*

A stream of lava spewed out of her hands and over the water, throwing up steam as it splashed down and cooled. She kept the stream going as she let out a victorious whoop.

“I’m not sure that’s safe,” Jason said. “Also, you just ranked-up. You’re going to be short on...”

The stream of lava stopped and Farrah fell over, unconscious.

“...mana,” he finished. “I hope no one saw that.”

## Chapter 337

### We Were All Monsters

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Farrah said as she and Jason drove to Kaito and Amy’s house. Given the short distance, they didn’t portal over so Jason had it ready in case of emergency.

“No,” Jason said. “I still say we could go with the chimera confluence for Kaito.”

“We’ve been over this,” Farrah said. “That’s an adventurer’s confluence.”

“We could put him in front of some monsters,” Jason said. “He might thrive. Think about it. Venom attacks, gas cloud attacks. He’d be an affliction specialist, like me.”

“Did you even get that third essence?”

“No,” Jason said. “I have snake and rat essences. Maybe the Americans could get me a skunk essence.”

“I think you should stick with the essences you’ve picked out, rather than try to make a petty point,” Farrah said.

“Fine,” Jason grumbled.

“The reason I asked if you were sure,” Farrah said, “is that you’ve already been through two rank-ups and he’s still better looking than you.”

“Seriously?” he asked.

“I’m not going to apologise for having eyes. You must have noticed that your rank-ups are making you look more like him.”

“That doesn’t make it something I want to talk about,” Jason said, just as his phone rang. “Oh, good. Someone who wants to talk about something other than how handsome my brother is.”

“If this world had gods,” Farrah said, “I’d be praying that they were calling to talk about your brother.”

Jason threw her a look of mock anger as he took out his phone and put it on speaker.

“Keti,” he greeted. “What can I do for you?”

“What’s this I’m hearing about a light show at the marina?”

“Sorry about that,” Jason said. “Farrah got a little over-excited after she hit silver.”

“Farrah is category three?”

“I am,” Farrah said. “Hello, Ketevan.”

“Congratulations,” Ketevan said. “Look, we’ve passed it off as a cashed-up bogan playing around with propane but try not to make too big a spectacle. You’re lucky we swapped out the police department with our people.”

“You can do that?”

“For a small town like Casselton Beach, yes,” Ketevan said.

“So that’s why Paul got transferred to Coffs,” Jason said. “I appreciate the effort you’ve put in.”

“You’ll need to discuss the changes in your capabilities with the tactical department, Farrah,” Ketevan said. “How powerful are you, now?”

“Not sure,” Farrah said. “I’ll need a few fights to settle into my new levels.”

“We’ll let you know, as always,” Ketevan said.

“Alright, thanks Ketevan,” Jason said.

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Oddly, Jason had found that combinations were harder to devise for non-combatants than for adventurers. Farrah had advised him to focus on what the individual was already capable of, thus Erika’s cooking magic set and Ian’s healing combination were right out of the Magic Society common combinations list. Ian’s confluence, ministrations, was one of the most healing-focused confluences on that list.

The living document couldn’t get updated from a universe away, but the existing archive was intact. Jason and Farrah had been parcelling out chunks of information on known essences in return for various concessions from the Network. On Anna’s advice, much of that had been with the Americans and the Chinese, helping to smooth some ruffled feathers.

Both factions were maintaining a presence in Sydney, as between them they had finagled some forty percent of the spots in the International Committee’s training program. Jason, but mostly Farrah, taught the Network’s young new essence users to fight like adventurers. They also spent time helping existing teams adapt their tactics, giving them a stop-gap until the young ones came into their own.

Jason found preparing the rest of his family to be less straightforward. They wouldn’t have the training, which made picking out essences all the more difficult. Jason found himself paying attention to the technology essence, which seemed to be analogous to the magic essence in that it was common but highly regarded.

Also like the magic essence, it often defined the nature of someone’s powers. Where magic would often lead to a skill evolution toward spells, the technology essence promoted conjuration abilities.

Technology was an essence that the Magic Society records had no insight on. That left them relying on the Network’s knowledge or experimenting with them on the parts of

his family he was less enthused with. Farrah, thus far, had steered him away from that course.

The vehicle essence was known to Pallimustus, but there were not a large number of known combinations, despite it being common. For Kaito, they picked out a combination that was both known and comprised of common essences. The vehicle, wind and swift essences combined into the soaring confluence, which was a known non-combat combination focused on flight.

On Farrah's world, that combination meant exotic magical flight vehicles. On earth, the results were somewhat different. Kaito demonstrated this after recovering from taking in his essences and downing a spirit coin. He used his very first ability to conjure a helicopter in his backyard. He then immediately dropped onto the grass, having consumed almost his entire mana supply.

"What did you do to my fence?" Erika asked. Ian was at work and Emi at school, but she had come to offer moral support to her brother. If that took the form of laughing at him as she hosed foul gunk off of him in the backyard, then so be it. She was less amused when the tail of the helicopter toppled the fence between her and her brother's yards.

"That's a big vehicle," Jason said. "How can he manage something like this at iron rank?"

"There are some mitigating factors," Farrah said. "Firstly, his essence combination is very flight-oriented. Something less specialised, like your ability to turn your familiar into a mount, is less effective when working with flight. He doesn't face that restriction. The other thing is that power sets don't balance individual abilities as much as the power set as a whole."

"Clive explained that to me," Jason said. "So, most of Kaito's powers will be weaker?"

"I've seen power sets like this before," Farrah said. "They have one very impressive power, while most of the others are minor powers that supplement the main one. Kaito, you can expect most of your abilities to affect your conjured helicopter in some way. Speed boosts, conjured weapons, that kind of thing."

"Weapons?" Kaito said.

"Yes," Farrah said. "I've never seen a power set with no combat abilities at all. Even Ian's will have a few, and he has as pacifistic a power set as you'll ever see."

Kaito took another spirit coin from Jason, standing up after putting it in his mouth. He smacked his lips unhappily.

"It's like licking a battery," he said.

Kaito walked around the helicopter currently filling his backyard.



"It's pretty sexy, I'll give you that," Jason said.

"It looks a lot like the FCX-001," Kaito said absently as he moved around it.

"Oh, the old FCX-001," Jason said. "I totally see it now."

Kaito threw his brother a cranky glance.

"The FCX-001 is a concept helicopter by Bell," Kaito said, at which Jason and Erika both perked up.

"Yes," Kaito groaned. "The same company that made the Bell 222 that Airwolf was based on. The FCX-001 is much more impressive than that, though."

"Than Airwolf?" Erika asked. "That doesn't seem likely."

"It does look like half-helicopter, half spaceship," Jason conceded.

"It's not just the looks," Kaito said. "The real thing is just a concept. Morphing rotor blades, advanced anti-torque innovations, augmented reality piloting. It's literally a helicopter from the future."

"Time for a ride, then, yeah?" Erika said.

"I can't fly it," Kaito said. "I don't know how to start trying to register this thing."

"Kai, it's a magic helicopter," Erika said. "You don't register it. You fly it upside down while yelling woo like you're Nature Boy Ric Flair."

"Who?" Kaito asked.

Kaito and Erika continued to argue while they looked over the helicopter before opening it up for a look inside. Amy had been quietly watching from the side without talking but didn't notice Jason when he slipped away or when he quietly approached her.

"You're a problem," he said. She didn't show it but he felt the slight startlement in her aura. She turned to face him.

"What kind of a problem?" she asked.

"For the others, it was relatively obvious which way to go. Cooking, for Erika. There's a bunch of druid-type choices for Dad. Farrah even managed to find a flying vehicle combination for your husband."

"Your brother."

"Brothers don't do what Kaito did. My brothers are in another universe."

"Do you even understand why he slept with me back then?"

"Because he's a dick."

"That's why I did it," she said. "I was selfish and cowardly and stupid enough to convince myself that the way to solve my problems was by blowing them up. He did it because you intimidate him. The insecurities floating around the back of his head told him that sleeping with me meant he was as good as you."

"Are you high? Did this whole thing happen because you confused the two of us six years ago and you haven't realised yet? On what planet is Kaito insecure about me?"

"You seriously never saw it?" she asked. "You were always insightful but you were both blind spots to each other. Think about the way he was back in school. Always doing everything he could to fit in, to be accepted. He never had the courage to be himself and live with people liking or hating it. You did. Aggressively. That always intimidated him."

"Why? Everybody loved him."

"Not everyone, Jason. Kaito could get any ordinary girl he wanted, but someone like Asya wouldn't spare him a second glance. She had handsome boys with the right clothes and the right opinions coming out of her ears. She was looking for someone who charted their own path. Why did you think she and I didn't get along? I had you on the shelf and she was trying to take you off before I was ready to."

"That doesn't sound like a positive thing."

"It was high school, Jason. We were all monsters. I know you think that people hated you in school and you were the misunderstood loner, getting by on cleverness and guile. I hate to break it to you, but that was just some teen angst crap. Most people didn't like you because you were a bit of a prick and thought you were too good for everyone."

"That seems harsh," Jason said.

"Too bad," Amy said. "Now that all this time has passed, have you and Asya...?"

"No."

"Why not? I haven't seen her much since she came back, but she clearly still has a thing for you."

"I know, but it isn't fair."

"Why not?"

"I can read her emotions and she can't read mine. I've learned that successful relationships require a balanced power dynamic. Otherwise, one half will just get crushed when the other half bangs his brother like a drum."

"You're going to have to get past that someday," she said.

"No, I'm not," Jason said. "I just have to live with it until you die of old age. I'll give you magic enough that you should comfortably see a hundred, but not much more."

"And how long will you live?"

"Assuming I don't get killed too often, then centuries. Forever, if I can swing it."

"Are you serious?"

"Amy, you've seen glimpses of a wider cosmos. I've had it crawl into my body and try to steal my soul. Language lacks the mechanism to represent the magnitude of it. Our

minds are too limited to grasp the scope. Only the soul can truly understand, but that's not a viewpoint you want, believe me."

"You're right that I don't understand. I want to, though. I want to see a wider world. If there really are all these magnificent things, I want to see them for myself."

"No."

"What?"

"I said no. You'll get more than most because you're family and I'll see you safe. You'll see things, as the world starts to change, but you'll see them on the news, with everyone else. I will never show you the true wonders that are out there. You'll keep seeing only glimpses, knowing that amazing things are out there while you're trapped in whatever's left of this world's mundanity."

"You really have changed, Jason. You never used to have this vindictiveness inside you."

"It was a parting gift from my closest friend," he said, turning to look at the helicopter.

"Looks like your husband is going to take us for a ride."

Right after he spoke, the door of the helicopter slid open to reveal Kaito.

"Come on, honey," he said. "Erika won't leave me alone until I fly this thing. Jason, we can do her magic when we get back, right?"

"Sure," Jason said. "No rush."

## Chapter 338

### Options

"I told you before we went on our helicopter ride that you were a tricky one to find a combination for," Jason told Amy. They were in her kitchen, along with Farrah, while Kaito watched the girls in the back yard.

"The issue is that you don't have the training to be a fighter," Farrah said. "With utility sets, the best bet is to leverage life skills but you're a politician. I'm not saying that doesn't involve skills, but not the kinds that are as easy to leverage as being a cook or a sailor."

"We have a combination here that we think will work for you," Jason said.

"It's a combination that political leaders in my world often use," Farrah said. "It's centred around knowledge and perception."

"What if I don't want that?" Amy asked. "I'm comfortable with my political capabilities as they are. What if I want some proper magic powers. Fireballs and lightning bolts."

Jason and Farrah shared a glance, Farrah snorting a laugh.

"Jason said you might say something like that," Farrah said. "That's why we prepared another option for you to choose from. Just to be clear, I don't think this is the way you should go. This is a raw combat combination and you have two little girls. It's not the time to go throwing yourself into danger with no training."

"Which is something we've also taken into account," Jason said. "We've picked out a combination based around what I call the Thadwick Principle. It's all about maximising damage output and minimising skill requirements."

"The idea," Farrah said, "is that you pump out a lot of power very quickly. We're envisaging a scenario where your family encounters some manner of unexpected threat and you can respond with extreme power. You won't be up for an extended fight, but you'll be able to finish a short one definitively. This is something like my approach, by the way."

"The combination is built around the gun essence," Jason said. "Guns are relatively easy to learn to at least a competent level. They also make a strong platform for humans, who are better at magical special attacks than full-blown magic spells."

"The big thing you'll need to learn is mana management, which I can teach you," Farrah said. "As I said, the burst of power approach is how I operate."

They waited for Amy to respond as she considered their proposal.

"Guns," she said finally. "That isn't exactly fireballs and lightning bolts."

"You understand the basics of an essence combination," Jason said. "Three essences, combining to make a fourth."

He plucked three cubes out of the air to plonk on the table, one after another. The first was gunmetal grey.

“Gun essence,” he said.

The next cube looked like glass containing a swirling mix of red, orange and yellow.

“Fire essence.”

The last was a dark blue cube with lightning arcing about on the inside from a central orb, like a plasma sphere.

“Lightning essence,” he said. “Your husband conjures up a helicopter. What we’re talking about here are flamethrowers and lightning guns.”

Amy trepidatiously reached out to pick up the lightning essence, then turned it over on her hands as she examined it.

“It’s tingling my fingers,” she said.

Jason and Farrah waited. Amy had seen essences before, but this was her first time holding one in her hands.

“Lightning gun?” she asked.

“Lightning gun,” Jason said.

Amy nodded to herself, a smile playing over her lips.

“Alrighty, then.”

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As they rode back toward Ken’s property in Shade’s car form, Jason bowed his head, rubbing his fingers into his temple.

“Part of me still wants to have nothing to do with them,” Jason said. “I left and cut them out of my life for years and I’m not entirely convinced that wasn’t better.”

“It’s a mess,” Farrah said, “but if you start carving up your family, you can’t do the things you want to do.”

Jason, Farrah and Hiro had been going through long discussions about the future. Jason was no longer hopeful of going back to the other world but certain it would happen. He needed to know that the family left behind would be able to handle whatever came in the wake of magic going public.

Originally, that had been built around Erika and her family, but if they ended up joining him in the other world, that would obviously change. He was not fully convinced that was a good idea.

“It’s coming up on time for you to put aside family concerns, at least for the moment,” Farrah said. “We’ll essence up your parents and then it’s time to focus on our

development. I need to get a handle of my new power levels and it's past time you did some more aura work. You've been putting it off."

Since accepting the World-Phoenix's blessing and the transfiguration it engendered, Jason's aura had become more powerful than ever. It had reached the point where his once-excellent control was no longer able to finesse his aura as well as it had in the past. Even before that point, he had occasionally lost control during moments of emotional distress.

Farrah had given Jason his original training, which he had supplemented with his own practise and occasional help from others. Danielle Geller, especially, had given him some useful guidance around the time she recruited him to teach aura control himself. She helped him come to grips with his enhanced soul power after his encounter with the Builder's star seed. It had reached the point where his aura strength was outstripping his ability to control it with precision, a situation he found himself in once again.

After discussing it with Farrah, they had decided that Jason needed a new aura control paradigm, stripping his old habits to the bone and retraining from scratch. The key to their approach would be him learning to wield his aura on normal humans with art and finesse. If he could control fine applications of his aura with precision, his gross applications would become all the more refined.

For this reason, they had recruited Craig Vermillion. Jason had been impressed from the beginning with Vermillion's nuanced aura control and wished to learn from him. Vermillion, in turn, was interested in applying techniques from the other world. As Jason was impressed with his fine control, Vermillion wished to learn Jason and Farrah's methods of weaponising auras.

The first meeting between Farrah and Craig had not gone well, but Farrah had arrested her sword-swing when Jason interposed himself. It took some time to convince Farrah that Craig wasn't an irredeemable predator. Her feelings were so strong that Jason was left wondering about vampires in the other world.

He had not met any vampires before Craig other than the controlled minions of a blood weaver monster. Was there something about the higher magic of Pallimustus that affected vampire behaviour, or was it a matter of prejudice? He wondered if the troubles with essence-born vampires and monsters like the blood weaver had tainted public opinion on vampirism.

It was possible that the differences were societal in nature. In a world of forensic science and erotic vampire novels, had the vampires of Earth simply adapted to a more effective lifestyle?

Vermillion's new lifestyle of lazy days and his secluded mansion had grown on him quickly. He showed no signs of missing the stern agent of the Cabal Jason had first met and his laconic attitude had won Farrah over.

"Once we've done Mum and Dad's essences, I'd like to pull back from the family stuff," Jason said. "From time to time I've found myself getting caught up in events and I've found it beneficial in those times to get back to basics. Put aside everything else for a while and focus on the fundamentals. I loved those early days, training with you and Rufus and Gary."

"I thought you'd crack immediately," Farrah said. "You were weirdly driven, though."

"Erika's going to be like that, too," Jason said. "You've seen what her daughter is like. Erika won't like using cores."

"Emi is oddly intense, even in the early training we've given her," Farrah said. "Right now I see her as the only one who should forgo cores, and that's only because we have the time to train her properly. We don't have skill books to cover, the way we did for you."

"We'll give them some training, though," Jason said.

"Of course," Farrah agreed. "Erika will realise that she has enough to learn just mastering the utility uses of her powers. We'll help them with the combat aspects, but only enough to get by. Unless they're fighting monsters on a regular basis, it isn't worth the training time, otherwise. Despite what Rufus will tell you, sometimes core advancement is the best choice."

"I still need to teach them all about the most basic stuff," Jason said. "They can sense auras now, which is going to weird them out. I don't think we told them they don't poop anymore."

"Didn't the Network offer to take all that off your hands?" Farrah asked.

"Hey, you're right," Jason said, brightening up. "I forgot after Erika dragged her feet, but they wanted to do a big, 'welcome to magic' seminar."

He took out his phone and called Ketevan. Anna's former deputy had filled her spot as Director of Operations smoothly as Anna moved up into the steering committee.

"How bad is it?" Ketevan said by way of greeting. "Please tell me you didn't sink your town into the ocean like Atlantis or something."

"Nothing like that," Jason said. "Does that offer to run my family through the Network family induction program still stand?"

"As in, we tell them how to navigate the magic world instead of you?" Ketevan asked. He was able to hear her sitting up straight in her chair, just from the change in her tone.

"I'll set it up immediately," she said. "When can they come in? We could send a bus. Or a helicopter. Actually, I'll send a team to you. What's the time? Right, I'll have them come in overnight and we can do it first thing. You won't be there, right?"

"I will not," Jason said.

"Great! I mean, that's fine. We'll rent a space, I'll send you all the details."

"Actually, can you just run it all through my sister?" Jason asked.

"No problem whatsoever. We have all her contact details."

"Alright, then," Jason said. "Just to let you know, I'm in the process of shoving a bunch of essences up in them. I'm mostly done, now."

"We really would have liked you to consult with us on that."

"Well, we can do that for anyone else," Jason said. "I'll tell Erika to expect your people to get in contact."

After ending the call, Jason leaned back into the seat. The shadow-stuff seat Shade produced was akin to cloud furniture in comfort and he felt the tension melt out of him.

"Once we give Dad his essences," he said, "we can do Mum last and we're done."

"Do you want to go over your father's essences again?" Farrah asked.

"Not after what you were like with Uncle Hiro," Jason said. "Every time we finalised the essences to give him, you started swapping them around."

"I've always wanted to have an apprentice with the right essences for array magic," Farrah said. "I didn't expect it to be an old man but your uncle's a dedicated learner. I just want to make sure we had the best combination for him."

"Do you realise what I had to trade away to get another renewal essence?" Jason asked.

"I'm guessing a pile of stuff you didn't want anyway."

"A big pile," Jason said. "A really big pile."

"Anyway, it left you the vast essence to give to your father."

"What was the final combination we gave Hiro again? At this point, I don't even remember and I conducted the ritual."

"The final combination was renewal, rune and balance to make the prosperity confluence."

"Why did we pick balance over magic again?"

"It will help with getting formations to adapt to their environment. Since we now know that the magical density of your world is in flux, you're going to want stability and flexibility in your permanent magical emplacements."



“Okay,” Jason said wearily. “I know I should care. Uncle Hiro deserves that but the tank is empty. I’ll care tomorrow. Next week at the outside.”

“Leave Hiro to me,” Farrah said.

“Okay.”

“We still have to do your parents, though. Are you sure about your mother’s combination?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “She’s such a Japanophile that she’ll take a lotus confluence over anything, even if it’s a terrible fit. Sword and water are cheap essences, and even after trading so many away, I’m still thick with plant essences.”

“What’s a Japanophile?”

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“I’m selling the land,” Ken told Jason. “In the end, it was a project to help me get over the loss of my son, and my boy came back to me.”

Ken caught Jason in a hug. Even when the family wearied him the most, his father’s warm and undemanding support was a balm.

“I’ve decided to look towards the future, instead of the past,” Ken said. “I’m going to help Hiro in his project. We’re going to build something for the family.”

“You were hesitant about taking essences,” Jason said. “That’s going to be a major magical endeavour.”

Ken shook his head.

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot,” he said. “There was a time that you needed me and I wasn’t there. That’s not happening again. If this is your world, now, then I’m in. All the way.”

Jason’s face broke into a smile and he hugged his father again.

“You know,” Jason said, “Kaito can conjure a helicopter out of thin air, now.”

“Is it Airwolf?” asked, Ken, the original sinner of his children’s obsession with eighties action-adventure shows.

“Kind of,” Jason said. “It the same company who made the Bell 222 except it’s a concept helicopter. They haven’t even made a working prototype, yet, according to Kai. It kind of looks like a sci-fi submarine”

“Nice. Does that mean I could magic up a talking trans-am?”

“I’ve already got a talking car, Dad. You don’t want a Team Knight Rider situation.”

“No, you don’t,” Ken said, shaking his head. “That boy Taika, what is in his head?”

“I know he got involved in some bad stuff when he was younger, back in New Zealand,” Jason said. “His father got him out and brought the whole family to Australia.

Probably because he heard about the Team Knight Rider thing and knew his son was on a bad path.”

Farrah shook her head.

“Can we just move on to the magic powers, please?” she asked.

“You know,” Ken said, “I saw those mirage chambers in your recordings. You could use them to make a show about a knight with a talking horse that solves crime.”

“A black horse with red eyes,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Ken agreed and Farrah put an exasperated hand over her eyes.

“They picked the wrong guy to save the world,” she grumbled.

## Chapter 339

### I Need Time

Jason heard Hiro, Ken and Farrah having a discussion as he trudged through his houseboat toward the bar lounge.

“...point of setting it up this way is so that it can be modified as magical conditions change,” Farrah was explaining.

“Do you expect magical conditions to change?” Hiro asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Farrah looked up at Jason as he made his way through the door.

“For now,” she said, “let’s just say that I’m confident they will.”

Jason slumped into a chair and Shade approached, placing on the table a tray bearing an immaculately-plated omelette, a large glass of juice and a neatly folded cloth napkin.

“Thanks, Shade,” Jason said with a tired smile. “You’re getting pretty good at this.”

“I have been watching the old episodes of Mrs Asano’s first cooking show on the internet,” Shade said. “It has many useful tips for people new to the methods and ingredients of this universe.”

Farrah, Hiro and Ken shared a look and got up, Hiro and Ken greeting Jason on their way out. Farrah dropped down into the seat opposite Jason.

“You look tired for a man who slept this late,” she said. He didn’t answer immediately, having a forkful of omelette in his mouth. He took his time, chewing slowly before putting down his fork and dabbing at his mouth with his napkin.

“I’ve been thinking about when you and I first met,” Jason said. “Not the very first part, with the sacrificing and the shovel.”

“I think that was mostly you.”

“I’m talking about the little village with the waterfall.”

“Didn’t I see that village getting destroyed in your recordings?”

“It was,” Jason said.

“You seem to have some fate with that village,” Farrah said. “Every time you go there, you’re protecting it from monsters.”

“Not protecting it well enough. At least the people got out, but their homes were razed to the ground. The Duke sent funds, so hopefully they’re back and resettled by now. I was thinking about before all that, when the three of us were passing through. I was so lost, still

half-convinced that I'd gone mad. I knew almost nothing of where I was and what was happening and what I did know, I didn't believe."

"I remember," Farrah said. "You were kind of a mess. Although, you befriended that whole town in about a day."

"Those people were the first thing that made sense to me," Jason said. "They reminded me of Uncle Robbo. My mum's whole side of the family, really, except Mum herself. I used to spend a lot of time with them because it annoyed her. She didn't like to be reminded that she came from common stock."

"I've met your Uncle Robbo I think twice," Farrah said. "I still like him more than her."

"That's a common reaction. So, I was in this village, with no idea of what to do and caught up with strangers that, to me, were very strange indeed."

"I'm not strange," Farrah said.

"That depends on context."

"Speak for yourself," Farrah said. "I used to think everyone from your world was strange, but it's really just you, your sister and your sister's kid. You're all weird, irrespective of context."

"Anyway," Jason said. "The point is that I was feeling completely adrift. No direction, no purpose. That was when Rufus told me something that was really important to my time in your world. This one too, really."

"If you say so," Farrah said. "I mostly remember Rufus kicking Anisa off the contract."

"He told me that your world was a chance to reinvent myself. To become the person I wanted to be, without the baggage of my old life. I didn't always succeed, but I always tried."

"Ah," Farrah said. "Now, you find yourself back here and weighed-down with all that baggage you put aside."

"Exactly. I don't think reconnecting with who I used to be is intrinsically bad, though. Back then I was a naïve idealist who had never had his principles put to the test. It felt like every time my ideals were put under strain, they crumbled. I think it's good for me to take another look at those principles. Yes, they were foolish and innocent, but they also represented ideals that I think are worth striving for."

"You want to be the best of both worlds," Farrah said.

"Yes," Jason said. "The problem is, it feels like I'm becoming the worst of them. All the baggage from here bringing out the reactionary aggression that kept me alive over there."

“The solution seems obvious,” Farrah said. “Ever since you returned to your world, you’ve been introducing your family to magic, dealing with a world you never realised was full of magic, working to rescue me. Usually, more than one of those at the same time.”

“You went through worse after getting here.”

“I did,” Farrah said, “but at least what I went through was simple. You’ve been fighting through a tangle and we both know you get caught up in your own head, while I can think in nice, clean lines. I see my direction and I walk it, while you can’t help diving into the weeds. You need to step away for a while and find your way back to a straight path.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Jason said. “I’m going to start by letting Erika take over the family stuff and pulling out of Network activity while I get my aura control in order. Then I might take off for a bit.”

“Some time to clear your head would do you well. You may wish to get away from home altogether.”

“I think I will. I’ve been to another world, yet there’s so much of this one I haven’t seen. It might just be time to remedy that. I’ll need you to watch over things while I’m gone. I’ll take most of the Shades with me but I’ll leave one so you can always reach me and I can check in. One for Emi, too. If something happens, Shade can get her to you.”

“How long will this sojourn of yours be?” Farrah asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “As long as it takes that I can come back without losing myself.”

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“Really?” Erika said. “Everything that’s going on and you want to take a gap year to bum around backpacking?”

“Something like that,” Jason said. “Not for a few weeks, but yes.”

They were on the roof deck of the houseboat as Jason explained his intentions.

“Do you really think that now is the best time to be traipsing off?” Erika asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “I have responsibilities that I’m not ready to meet. I need time, Eri. Time away from monster armies and interdimensional invasions. From secret societies and from family so caught up in their own revelations that they don’t stop to think about what I’ve been through even when I recorded THE ENTIRE BLOODY THING!”

He got out of his chair and paced to the edge of the deck, drawing a sharp breath he didn’t need and slowly letting it out. He leaned on the railing, looking out over the water. The day was overcast, painting the sea grey.

“I’m sorry,” he said, any emotion washed out of his voice. “That wasn’t for you.”

“Yes it was,” she chuckled. “I want you to yell at me. You always box everything away and hide it behind a clown mask. I’m glad that you trust me enough to open up.”

“I need time, Eri,” he said again, still staring out at the ocean. “I’m dangerously off balance and I can’t afford to be. My mistakes can really hurt people and my failures...”

He hung his head.

“How am I meant to save the world?” he asked, his voice cracking. “How can that be on me? Two years ago I was selling staples and rubber bands. You know what a mess I was. How can anyone expect me to not bugger this up?”

Erika moved up to Jason and put an arm around his shoulder.

“I always knew you could do great things, Jason. I was more thinking state parliament than fighting evil, but still.”

He snorted a laugh, in spite of himself.

“This whole thing is absurd,” he said. “It has been from the beginning. I took a lot of stupid risks because in my head, it never felt quite real. Then Farrah died and all of a sudden it was, but I just kept taking risks because I felt invincible. Then I was grabbed and someone tried to feed me to the Builder. That hit me for six, but eventually I was back to risk-taking because that’s what had to be done. And we did get it done.”

Erika sighed.

“We’ve been so caught up in all the strangeness you brought home that we never thought about the fact that you went through all of that and more. And you had to do it when you were lost, alone and in danger. We see the way you are, now, and don’t think about how you must have been then. You didn’t start your recordings until you’d moved past the worst of it. Now I can’t help thinking about how much you didn’t put in them.”

“There was some crazy stuff,” Jason said. “Me and this guy, Hiram, got shot off the side of a mountain by a magic waterfall. It stopped all of a sudden and we were trying to figure out why when it started up again. We were fine, because magic powers. That was my third day.”

“I can’t imagine.”

“That’s nothing,” he said. “I met gods, Eri. Actual, honest-to-goodness gods. Standing in their presence, you can feel the divine power blasting over you. It’s like a tsunami with a superiority complex. If they want it to be, anyway. They can tone it down, but they generally don’t. Reap the wonder of the masses and whatnot.”

“I’m not sure how to respond to that,” Erika said.

“You said you want to come with,” Jason said. “If you do, you’ll see them for yourself. Gods aren’t shy.”

She sighed again.

"I want to be here for you, little brother. But you talk about these things and I don't know how to empathise, as much as I want to. You're describing things so far removed from anything I know. I guess that's the problem, isn't it? Farrah is the only one who really understands what you've been through."

"In so many ways," Jason said. "We both know what it is to wake up in a strange world. What it is to die. I died, Eri. I know you've all been ignoring it because here I am alive and I've been known to say some outlandish things, but it happened. I died. It was violent and painful and I never expected to come back from it. I felt that certainty that my life was over."

"I can't imagine."

"It's not just the things that were done to me, either. It was the things I did. I killed people. I saved people. I've been a hero saving lives and a monster reaping them from the dark. I found companions who mean everything to me; only you and Emi mean as much."

"I want to see that world," Erika said. "I want to share your experiences. See those wonders and understand those horrors."

"If that's still what you want when the time to go back comes," he said, "then I'll take you. There's still plenty of time to decide, one way or the other. I can't make promises about the other side, though. It's a world where my power is insignificant."

"I can't not go," Erika said. "Not now that I know what's out there. Ian's the same. I know he plays the straight man to his wife and daughter but he has a beautiful passion in his soul. I married him for a reason. And as for our daughter, well. At this stage, if we tried to keep her from the other world, she'd never forgive us."

"Farrah and I have been talking," Jason said. "If you're really serious about coming with us, you need to start making some big choices now."

"Such as?"

"Taking Emi out of school. She already knows more than most kids do by the time they leave high school and what they have left to teach her won't matter in the other world. She needs proper, intensive training."

"Only if she's going to fight monsters," Erika said. "I don't want that for her."

"Mum had specific ideas about what she did and didn't want for me," Jason pointed out. "It didn't work out so well for her, but I suppose it won't be like that for you and Emi. She's nothing like me."

"Point taken," Erika said. "I just want her to be safe. I know you said that safe may not be an option, though, even if we stay here."

“Just start giving the idea of home schooling some thought,” Jason said. “I know how big a move it is. It’s deciding the future of your family in a single moment.”

“Home schooling,” Erika said. “You can’t train her if you’re off who knows where.”

“Farrah can train her better than I can. And I won’t be gone forever. While I am, I’ll need you to step up and take the family in hand. Did Ketevan call you, yet?”

“Yesterday afternoon. I had to dampen her enthusiasm. She would have had us all in a room at 6am, given her way.”

“I think she wants to steer you away from my influence,” Jason said.

“That’s a sound approach to most things,” Erika said, squeezing her brother’s shoulder warmly. “I really am glad you’re opening up, Jase. I want to be there for you; you just have to let me. Tell me that you aren’t leaving just to run away.”

“I’m not running,” he said. “I know who I was here and who I was there. I need the time and the space to figure out who I am in both. Who I want to be, and how to be that person.”

“Alright,” Erika said. “You’ll have to take a lot of Uncle Jason time before you go, you realise.”

“There are worse burdens,” he said.

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Sitting in a meditative pose, Jason opened one eye to watch Farrah floating in the air.

“You’re not concentrating,” she scolded, her eyes remaining closed.

Levitation, Jason had discovered, was a perk of reaching silver-rank. It was an intrinsic property of a silver-rank soul, allowing the aura it projected to physically affect the environment. Jason’s aura, despite being stronger than Farrah’s, could not equal the feat. It was a quality versus quantity issue, where Jason lacked not the aura power but the inherent properties of a silver-rank soul. Which hadn’t stopped him from wasting a good amount of time trying to replicate it anyway.

“You need to get back to aura training,” Farrah admonished. “This levitation isn’t even a practical ability. It requires intense concentration, has minimal effect and is easy to disrupt with just some basic aura suppression.”

“Yeah, but floating as you meditate looks super cool.”

When rebuilding his suite of aura control techniques from scratch, Jason drew on various sources of knowledge, experience and inspiration. Farrah’s instruction was the bedrock, as her mastery of orthodox aura control technique made for a grand foundation onto which he could build more exotic approaches.



That began with his own experiences. He had seen a lot and frequently used his aura in combat. His soul had been savaged to the limit of tolerance and, with help, come back stronger than ever. All of that gave him a wealth of personal experience to incorporate into his new aura control praxis.

Vermillion also had contributions to make. While the vampire's aura operated somewhat dissimilarly to an essence user's, he had numerous insights into fine aura control, have spent decades using it on normals without them ever being the wiser.

A source of inspiration was the sole diamond-ranker Jason had met, the Mirror King. His aura had felt like a part of the world around it, as if his very nature was in perfect symbiosis with the world. Jason had only been an iron-ranker at the time, with only the beginnings of the aura strength he now possessed. He didn't know if the Mirror King's aura truly did merge into the world around it or if it was some manner of exquisite technique. Either way, he kept the Mirror King in mind as he established not only a new baseline for his aura techniques but set a path for further growth.

The final pillar on which Jason supported his new techniques was Shade. The elusive shadow entity had a natural proclivity for stealth and years of practise that put the Mirror King to shame. He had an extensive knowledge of Order of the Reaper stealth techniques and the accumulated knowledge of previous essence users he had also served as a familiar.

Shade's own aura-masking prowess was something Jason had never been able to emulate as Shade method of producing an aura was more alien than Vermillion's, or at least, it had been. With the World-Phoenix's blessing, Jason's spiritual nature had grown much closer to that of an astral being. The methodologies didn't directly translate, but Jason was able to glean at least some insights from Shade's bounty of knowledge and experience.

Over the course of a month, Jason spent almost every moment either in seclusion on the houseboat or discussing aura techniques with Farrah, Shade or Vermillion. Whenever he took a break, he sought out his niece, not for training but simply for family time. He had already passed Emi's nascent training program fully into Farrah's hands. The only other exception to his dedicated training was a weekly gathering of friends and his closest family.

## Chapter 340

### Walkabout

Jason had satisfied himself that his newly refined aura control techniques were adequate. It was now time for a test, which was something Vermillion had devised. That had brought Jason, Vermillion and Farrah to a large shopping centre in Sydney where they had sat on a bench, not far inside the entrance.

"I'm not sure this is the best idea," Jason said. "If I don't get this right, the Network won't be happy."

"There has to be a failure condition," Vermillion said. "If there's no pressure, it isn't a proper test of your abilities."

"A gold-ranker can use their aura to pass through a crowd unnoticed," Farrah said. "A high-end silver can do the same, and you're approaching that level of aura strength."

"Strength aside," Jason countered, "I don't actually have a silver-rank aura. Otherwise, I'd be able to levitate."

"Levitation is a capability inherent to silver-rank auras," Farrah said. "What you're attempting here is a matter of strength correctly applied. You're used to masking your aura when you're sneaking around. This is a more sophisticated version of that."

"That's an understatement to the point of being a lie," Jason said.

Farrah had originally trained Jason in the three basic functions of aura control: projecting his aura, retracting his aura and suppressing the auras of others. All aura control techniques were variations or extensions of those three. After Farrah's death, Jason had mostly developed his skills through experience, with only occasional external guidance.

With the experience he had under his belt, plus the assistance of his companions, he had rebuilt his skill set from the ground up, learning to express the three basic functions in more sophisticated ways.

What he was about to attempt was a technique that required the precise and nuanced application of all three functions at once. Firstly, he needed to blend projection and retraction, seemingly contrary effects, to merge his aura into the ambient magic. He had no illusions of matching the Mirror King's achievements in this area, but that had been the inspiration for what he was attempting.

The other – and trickiest – aspect of what he was doing was an application of aura suppression. It needed to be delicate, complex and painstakingly precise as it directly impacted the aura senses of others.

A person's aura senses were largely a function of their aura itself. Even normals could sense auras on some level if the auras were strong and directed enough. For most practical purposes they were aura blind unless someone with aura control didn't want them to be.

After a lengthy discussion with Vermillion on how vampires manipulated auras, Jason had been working on variations of aura suppression that manipulated the aura senses of others, rather than suppressing their whole aura. This was an area in which vampires naturally excelled, while Jason had not realised it was even possible. Farrah had never introduced him to it because essence users could usually only match what a vampire could manage at much higher rank. Jason's absurdly ramped-up aura strength changed that.

He could not directly mimic the techniques of vampires or high-end essence users. Shade had techniques that outstripped both, to the point of being able to confuse digital recordings, but Jason could not match that either. Instead, he blended aspects from all three to develop a bespoke technique tailored to the unusual properties of his unique aura. This was the theme of all his new aura control skills.

The goal of his current activity was to pass through a crowd of normals unnoticed. It was not, strictly speaking, invisibility. Rather, the idea was to prevent the perceptions of others from registering his presence. The crux of the process was enacting the technique while keeping the people he was enacting it upon from noticing. If they sensed his manipulations, the effect would be the exact opposite of the desired outcome.

With his current prowess, Jason was only willing to attempt it with normal people, who were effectively aura blind and had the least chance of sensing what he was doing. Even then, he was far from certain it would work. It would take considerably more practice before he could use it on even freshly-minted iron-rankers like his family.

"Do I have to use the cloak?" he asked. "That seems like asking for trouble."

"We'll only know it's working if you use the cloak," Vermillion said. "Otherwise, they won't know you anyway because you'll just be some guy."

Jason frowned but didn't argue further as he got to his feet. He closed his eyes and extended his senses through his aura, feeling the people around him. Relaxing his body and soul, he let himself become one with his surroundings, his aura blending into the ambient magic. He could feel how inexperienced he still was but he sensed at least a basic level of success.

Next, he started oh-so-delicately affecting the auras around him. Like all applications of aura stealth, it was a deeply inefficient process that took a disproportional level of strength for his aura to operate unnoticed. With such precise work, even Jason's

powerhouse aura was barely able to effectively impact the normal auras around him without it going awry. A month of practise was not enough to act with greater efficiency.

Jason's starlight cloak appeared around him and he started walking through the shopping centre. Despite the starlight rider making his first public appearance in months, not a single person looked his way. On the contrary, their eyes seemed to slide off him, looking elsewhere without registering anything strange.

Shade, for his part, made sure that Jason showed up as no more than a blur on the shopping centre's security cameras. Jason was not sure if he would ever be able to replicate such an ability.

Jason walked the full length of the shopping centre, then went up a level and came back the other way. As a final test, he dropped off the mezzanine and floated down to Farrah and Vermillion, still undetected. His cloak vanished as he sat back on the bench with the others.

"That was good," Vermillion said. "A little too good, in fact."

"Too good?" Jason asked.

Vermillion handed a wad of cash over to Farrah.

"I told you that aura control was his strongest skill," she said.

"You bet on me getting in huge trouble with the Network?" Jason asked Vermillion.

"You don't need to worry," Vermillion said. "The Cabal is happy to step in and cover for you."

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Erika and Ian were hosting the farewell barbecue for Jason's departure. Emi, who normally clung to him like a limpet, was still angry about his leaving again. He could sense her watching him from her bedroom window. The backyard was packed full of friends and family, which made it a mixed bag both in terms of who knew about magic and who Jason wanted to avoid. It had been made very clear that there was to be no talk of magic, although Jason was not confident that would hold up. Once a few more beer kegs were emptied, he expected some slips, but everyone would be blotto by that point anyway.

As Greg and Jason waited their turn to get sausages from one of the grills, Greg leaned close and spoke in a low, conspiratorial voice.

"What's going on with Farrah?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Jason asked.

"I'm pretty sure she got hotter. Like, getting some work done hotter, but didn't disappear long enough to have work done, the way you did."

"I didn't have any work done," Jason said.

“I’ve known you since we were fourteen, Jase. Hormones don’t shave half your chin off.”

Jason gave up trying to respond. After getting his sausage, he left Greg peering suspiciously in Farrah’s direction and made some more rounds of family members.

“G’day, Nanna,” he said to his paternal grandmother, grinning at the glare it earned him. “Sorry, Grandmother.”

“Save your common colloquialisms for your other grandmother,” she said. “She’s classless enough to like them.”

“She’s not a yob, Grandmother. She had Alzheimer’s.”

Grandmother Asano raised her eyebrows at Jason, then glanced over at his other grandmother, chugging a beer.

“Okay,” he acknowledged. “She might be bit of a yob.”

“I don’t suppose you know anything about her miraculous recovery?” Grandmother Asano asked. “Medically, it doesn’t make any kind of sense.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s a miracle,” Jason said. “Didn’t you hear what Great Aunt Marjory said?”

“I’d rather listen to the whine of the drill about to lobotomise me than that woman. The results would be essentially the same.”

Jason snorted a laugh, the corners of his grandmother’s lips turning up on her otherwise stern face.

“I don’t suppose you took the time to finally learn Japanese during your mysterious absence?” she asked.

“I might have picked up a few things.”

“Is that so?”

“I wanted to read manga in the original language. Are you a proper One-Punch Man fan, Grandmother, or do you only watch the anime like a prole?”

“You make me wish I’d taken worse care of myself,” she said. “Then I’d have a walking stick to hit you with.”

Jason chuckled as he leaned in to kiss her on the cheek.

“Don’t be too hard on Hiro while I’m away,” he told her.

“I’ll deal with my reprobate son in whatever means I deem appropriate,” she said.

“Okay, but just remember that he’s doing better,” Jason said. “Don’t be so eager to punish him for his old ways that you push him back into them.”

“And how did you become so wise all of a sudden?” she asked.

“The usual way,” he said. “I made a lot of mistakes.”

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Over the course of the afternoon and into the evening, Jason endured a cavalcade of awkward conversations with distant relatives. Asya was a late arrival and took him aside for some magic-related chat.

"I've been working some bureaucratic wheels," she said. "It took me longer than I liked, but I finally got approval."

"Oh?" Jason prompted.

"I know it's hard to maintain a friendship when you have to keep almost all of what you do secret," she said. "I had Greg vetted and approved for essences."

"Seriously? How did you get them to swallow that?"

"You going on walkabout has them worried," she said. "They haven't liked not having your looting services during your month of seclusion. If it wasn't for the strike teams Farrah set up doing so well, the Sydney steering committee would be getting downright obstreperous. You're lucky you have Anna on the committee now. She may not love the way you do things but she understands how valuable you are and trusts that you'll be loyal."

"Where does that trust come from?" he asked.

"Me," Asya said.

Jason chuckled.

"I'm guessing the fact that I never really asked much from them is a factor."

"Yes. One they've come to regret, in fact. If you'd gotten more out of them, there'd be more of an obligation to not wander off."

"Funny, that," Jason said. "It's almost like I didn't want to be pinned down."

"I'd appreciate it if you threw the International Committee the occasional bone while you're out and about," Asya said. "There are branches all around the world that would love for you to drop in on their incursions."

"You mean they'd like my looting power to drop in."

"It's a good way to spread some goodwill," Asya said. "If we're extra lucky, having a branch-agnostic running around like Santa Claus might even foster some inter-branch unity."

"No pressure, then. I think I can manage something like that."

He glanced over at Greg, who spotted him and nodded a greeting.

"You'll need to run Greg through your Network program," he said. "I doubt your bosses want me teaching anyone from scratch."

"That's the idea," Asya said. "He's approved for essences but he won't be cleared to actually get them until he's been through our welcome to magic induction. We'll have him ready by the time you get back. You'll need to supply the essences yourself, by the way."

He gave her a warm smile.

"Thanks, Asya. You keep going to bat for me, time and again. Don't think I haven't noticed. How about you and I do something fun together after I get back?"

"I'd really like that," she said, flustered.

"I still need to do a few hello and goodbyes," he said. "I'm going to break the news to Greg, by the way."

"We'd prefer to do that," she said.

"I reckon you would," Jason said.

She snorted a laugh.

"You can be incredibly obnoxious, you know that?"

He responded only with a flashing grin as he wandered off. Greg meandered over and took his place.

"Asked him out yet?" Greg asked her.

"How is that your business?" she asked.

"I started watching you moon over that guy ten years ago," he said. "He was missing, presumed dead, but then he mysteriously reappears. Now he's going to vanish again for who knows how long. What does it take for you to make a move, lady?"

"It's a lot more complicated than you realise. And I don't exactly see you with a full dance card, Greg."

"Yeah," he said, "but I'm the stand by himself in the corner guy. You're not meant to be here with me."

"You shouldn't put yourself down like that," she said.

"Didn't you just put me down?"

"That's why you shouldn't pile on to yourself."

"Just give it a few more years of standing in the corner," Greg said. "Piling onto yourself will be what passes for date night."

"Ew."

After making sure he spoke to everyone, Jason made a discreet exit. Most of the people there were less interested in Jason than they were a booze-up anyway, so he was able to grab Greg and slip away unnoticed.

"What's going on?" Greg asked.

"We're going for a ride," Jason said.

“Oh, you need a designated driver.”

“Actually, we don’t need any driver.”

“Oh, do I finally get to see the famous self-driving car? Where do you store that thing? It’s never parked at the marina.”

Jason let out a chuckle.

“Are you ready for your life to be changed forever?” he asked.

“Only since I was fourteen,” Greg said. “What’s going on?”

“Greg, I know you’ve picked up on a strange vibe around me and the people I know.”

“You faked your death and came back under circumstances I’m still not exactly clear on,” Greg said. “I could be in a coma and pick up vibes that strange.”

“Well, tonight’s the night you learn what’s going on.”

“Yeah? Alright, then. What’ve you got?”

“Well,” Jason said. “Let’s start with the fact that magic is real and Asya is part of a secret society that hides it from the world, but she got permission to let me tell you all about it.”

“Okay,” Greg said. “That’s a bit odd. Did someone slip you a baked good of dubious provenance?”

“It wouldn’t do anything,” Jason said. “I’m immune to ordinary drugs.”

“What does that mean?”

“I have vast magic powers,” Jason said. “I’m kind of a warlock ninja. I’ll explain everything, but we start by getting in my car.”

“What car? Seriously, are you on some kind of hallucin...”

Greg trailed off as a cloud of darkness erupted from Jason’s shadow and took the form of a large supercar.

“What the...?”

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“This is your yacht?” Greg asked.

“Yep. I was flying to France with Asya because Farrah was being held by some bad guys—”

“What?”

“Don’t sweat the details; you can ask Asya later. Anyway, someone put a bomb on the plane and it blew up in the air, so—”

“WHAT?”

“If you keep interrupting I’ll never get through this,” Jason said happily, relishing his friend’s flabbergasted state.



“You were in a plane that blew up?”

“Yeah, it was pretty rough, and they had guys waiting for survivors in the water. On this very boat, in fact. So, I dropped down onto the boat and took care of business.”

“You skydived out of an exploding plane?”

“The others skydived; I just dropped down. Magic powers, remember? Anyway, long story short, I beat the guys so badly that when I told them I was taking the boat, they apparently thought I meant literally. They signed it over to me and drove it here after I’d gone off to get Farrah.”

“Jason, every single thing you’ve told me tonight is insane nonsense.”

“I know, believe me. And we’ve only just scratched the surface. You remember the Starlight Rider?”

“Of course I do,” Greg said. “It was all over the television for weeks. Wait, are you saying...?”

“Who’s got two thumbs and killed a bunch of bikers hopped up on vampire blood? This guy.”

Greg shook his head.

“You’ve shown me some crazy things tonight, Jason, but this all sounds like crazy fanfic drivel.”

“I know. I probably should have let Asya and her secret society bring you in easy, but I kind of love just throwing all the madness out there and watching people – in this case, you – slowly realise it’s all true. Come on; I’ll pass you off to Asya and she can help you break it all down.”

Jason opened a portal arch.

“After you, my friend,” he said.

“After me what?” Greg asked.

“I’m taking you back to my sister’s house,” Jason said. “You left your car there and I want to say goodbye. I told everyone I’m leaving tomorrow but I’m heading out tonight. Oh, sorry. I forgot to tell you that’s a teleportation gate.”

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After fobbing a somewhat disoriented Greg off on Asya, Jason brought Erika and Emi through the portal to his yacht. Emi stood apart from Jason, glaring at him. He gave her an awkward smile.

“There will come a day, Moppet, when you and I will have grand adventures.”

“Why not now?” she pouted. “You could take me with you.”

“This is something I need to do for myself,” he said. “Only you and Farrah will have Shades with you, so only you two can talk to me whenever you want.”

“You say that like you don’t have a phone,” Emi said.

Jason didn’t make any further progress before Erika said it was time to go and led her daughter back through the portal, leaving Jason alone. He was about to close the portal when Emi barrelled out of it to clasp him in vice clamp hug.

“I love you, Uncle Jason. You have to come back, okay?”

He ruffled her hair.

“I love you too, Moppet.”

## Chapter 341

### Too Valuable to Lose

In a Chinese village levelled by a powerful earthquake, the villagers watched as an alien figure used a beam of energy to cut through the girder blocking the hole in which a child was trapped. It was a floating cloak, containing not a person but an energy that looked much like the Helix nebula, commonly known as the Eye of God. Floating around it were eye-like orbs, which fired the beams that were cutting away the debris.

At first, the villagers had been afraid of Jason and his terrifying companion, but as they used their powers to retrieve person after person trapped within the rubble they became optimistic, albeit warily so.

The beams of Jason familiar, Gordon, made short work of the collapsed girder, revealing the narrow hole underneath. Jason could easily see through the darkness to the top of the little boy's head and extended his shadow arms down to pluck him out. As soon as he was free, his mother rushed forward to embrace him as the villagers looked on. They were all as dirty as Jason was under his cloak.

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In her office, back in Australia, Sydney Network branch committeewoman Annabeth Tilden was watching a video file. It was news footage, intercepted without ever going into public distribution. It had been sent by the Beijing Network branch, along with an angrily-worded message.

"...took responders several hours to reach more isolated areas in the wake of the catastrophic earthquake. The collapse of the bridge you see behind me devastated this small village but the villagers themselves attribute the low number of casualties to a number of mysterious individuals, several of which they describe as appearing supernatural in nature. This is not the first..."

Anna closed the video file with a sigh and added it to a folder with the others. One of the more disturbing elements was that the news footage was not in Mandarin but in English. Not only was Jason being far too prominent in his actions but clearly someone wanted to publicise them in the west. Not all of them had been intercepted before going online.

"Jason may be playing rather loosely with the secrecy provisions of our agreement after our people attacked him in Hanoi," Ketevan said, "but at least he hasn't been showing off the stars in his cloak since then. No one has connected the stories to the Starlight Rider."

“Yet,” Anna said. “And they weren’t our people in Hanoi.”

“How many times have we had to explain that the people who went after him were Network but not *our* Network?” Ketevan asked. “I’m not so sure he’ll still see us an ally once he’s done with his journey of self-discovery or whatever he’s doing is.”

“I swear, I want to fire a missile at the Hanoi branch.”

“The International Committee more or less did,” Ketevan reminded her.

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A month earlier, in Hanoi, Jason had underpriced the yacht in order to sell it off quickly. He decided to start his trip by playing tourist but quickly sensed the people following him.

The capture team had two category threes and a dozen category twos. They realised that Asano had clearly sensed them and they were forced to shed slower members as they pursued the elusive target through the city.

They finally tracked him down in the Hong River Slum Town, a bizarre mix of urban, industrial and rural. Illegal dwellings were bunched in with small farm plots, stores and even factories. Dirt roads and irrigation ditches defined the thoroughfares, with everything from the buildings to the very ground marking poverty, pollution and dilapidation. It was a backwater oddly located in a city of seven and a half million.

Without street lights, it was a dark and dangerous place at night, more for the environment than the residents. For the capture team, though, darkness was not an issue. Only one of the category threes, Thanh, had managed to maintain the chase all the way, courtesy of speed powers granted by his light essence. The same light essence was able to illuminate the area with his aura.

Thanh’s aura didn’t simply radiate light. Over a wide area, all darkness was banished. It seemed to have no source and was simply everywhere, filling every nook and cranny with soft illumination.

As the space lit up, Jason was revealed to be standing right in front of the capture team. The only remaining patch of darkness was inside the hood of his cloak, in which only a pair of silver eyes could be seen.

“I’m surprised anyone was this stupid,” Jason said in Vietnamese. His skill at actively using his translation power with specific languages was improving, although he was stubbornly clinging to syntax that gave an odd mix of perfect pronunciation and deeply odd grammar. Rather than try to adapt, the way Farrah had so quickly, he had made it into a rather obnoxious signature.

“I didn’t think anyone would be stupid enough to cross the International Committee after they gutted the Lyon branch like a fish,” he continued.

“You no longer need to concern yourself with things like that,” Thanh said. “You belong to us, now, so you don’t make decisions anymore.”

“It could be the Chinese,” Jason mused, ignoring the man. “They might be using you as a cat’s paw to test my capabilities without it blowing back on them. Maybe the EOA, looking to take me off the board before I start looking for them over their part in holding my friend prisoner. It could be that there’s no one and you’re really this dumb. I mean, you let me lead you by the nose until half of your team was left behind. Your trackers kind of suck, by the way. I had to aura project like a lighthouse for them to keep up and it was still hard to avoid escaping by accident.”

“You are arrogant,” Thanh said. “That is your Japanese blood speaking.”

“Strewth, racist enough for you, mate?”

“We have studied your methods, Asano. You are a creature of the shadows. Without them, you are vulnerable and exposed.”

“You’ve got me there,” Jason said. “I definitely didn’t train with someone from a family of essence-user instructors the equal of anyone on two worlds who laboriously drilled me on how to fight when I was caught out of my element.”

“You like to jabber and distract,” Thanh said. “We know this about you. Quick words cannot change that we hold the advantage in numbers, in power and in the environment. There are no shadows for you to cower in.”

They were on a dirt road, with a heavily polluted irrigation ditch running along one side and a ramshackle slum house on the other. The six category twos were arrayed in front of Thanh, with Jason standing before them in his combat robes and cloak. With the appearance of the light, the attention of the locals had been grabbed and they were variously hiding, fleeing or even recording the proceedings.

“Can you blur me in those videos?” Jason asked Shade, under his breath.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Asano. This silver-rank light is having an extremely deleterious effect on my capabilities. I will be unable to manifest any of my bodies or run interference on detection abilities. I can only remain in the hood of your cloak, which remains impervious to the shadow deletion. Otherwise I would not even be able to speak with you.”

“No worries,” Jason said. “Part of why we left was to throw ourselves into training, right? This should push our limits nicely.”

“This may be throwing ourselves a tad hard, Mr Asano.”

“Maybe, but that guy Lyon sent left a lingering unpleasantness. I’d like to—”

“You have the nerve to stand in front of me and talk to yourself?” Thanh yelled, anger scoring his face. His aura blasted out, only to stop dead against Jason’s like it was a brick wall. Jason’s aura wasn’t strong enough to suppress the silver-ranker’s and eliminate the light, but it was definitely stronger, leaving Thanh visibly unnerved.

“KILL HIM!” Thanh screamed, forgetting that their purpose was to take him alive.

A grab-bag of powers came Jason’s way. One of the bronze-rankers underwent a bizarre transformation, his arms turning into snakes and his legs into those of a grasshopper. He pounced at Jason, who intercepted the snake fangs with his cloak as the man landed in front of him. He then pushed into the man and rammed a conjured dagger up under the man’s jaw to pierce his brain.

Bronze-rankers couldn’t fight through what should have been lethal blows the way a silver-ranker could. The man with a dagger piercing his brain was tough enough to cling to life but fell limp. Jason grabbed his collapsing body and used him as a shield to soak up the other attacks coming his way. A fire bolt spell, a spiked ball on a chain and a laser beam of light from the silver-rank Thanh all impacted against the body.

The bronze-ranker in Jason’s arms did not survive the attacks and Jason rushed forward, still using him as a shield. He rammed the corpse into one of the other bronze-rankers, leaving them both to topple over as Jason spun away, positioning himself so the group was obstructing one another’s sightlines as much as possible. His dagger, in a backhand grip, ran across the next victim’s throat before jabbing back into the side of the neck. Jason let him go as the man stumbled backward, clutching desperately at his throat with one hand as the other scrambled for a healing potion.

The shock of Jason’s counter-blitz only lasted moments and a fresh wave of attacks was already on its way. To an observer, it might seem that Jason was dangerously outmatched. From Jason’s perspective, the attacks were the wild, inexpert flailing of amateurs. That was not to say they were without strategy. The elimination of the shadows had a large impact and it wasn’t the only trick that seemed tailor-made for him.

Clearly, the enemy had learned of his fight against the last silver-ranker and the tether power that had pinned him down. One of the bronze-rankers had a similar ability and Jason had neither shadow nor cover to avoid it. Jason tossed his dagger into the air and a shadow hand emerged from his cloak to snatch it. His normal hands each pulled a throwing dart from the sheaths on his chest and flung them out.

The first was an explosive dart, thrown directly at the tether rod. The blast from a tether rod being destroyed had caused him to lose against his last fight against a silver-ranker, but this time he was triggering it himself. The second dart was thrown at the

ground, right in front of the rod. This was the dart Jason had developed after that same fight, using the artifice knowledge he gained from a skill book. It hit the ground and a door-sized wall of magically reinforced ballistics gel sprang into being, right as the tether rod exploded.

The force from the blast sent the person who used the ability flying, along with another of the bronze-rankers. It didn't kill them but Jason knew for himself how disorienting that blast could be. It would give him some breathing room with the other three who, like Jason, were protected as the blast hit the gelatin wall. Gobbets of the ballistics gel rained thickly but harmlessly over them.

As the fight resumed in the wake of the blast, Jason's cloak protected him from some attacks, although its shadowy substance was also negatively impacted by the light. Its true value was to obscure his true body position, causing others to simply miss. He had long incorporated unexpected movements into his technique, with hours upon hours of flexibility and balance training. Between that and his cloak's ability to spread out and dance to Jason's whims, it was tricky to pinpoint his body's exact location at any given moment.

Jason's magical senses tracked incoming magical attacks before they were made. This included conjured and magical weapons, while mundane weapons would be useless. Knowing where the attacks would be, he was in a constant state of moving to where they wouldn't, never stopping still.

The result was that he seemed impervious to attack, moving like a ghost through projectiles and weapon swings. Part of it was that he truly did avoid many blows. Another part was that his cloak masked the blows that did land, while he gave no indication of being harmed.

For his part, his dagger flashed out to land again and again. His shadow arm extended at need, giving his dagger no less reach than the guy with the spiked ball and chain. It flailed like an unattended hose with the water turned to full, yet in the seeming randomness, his dagger bit flesh time after time, riddling the enemy with afflictions.

Jason also pulled out the hydra whip he looted from his very first bronze-rank monster, wielding it with a second shadow arm. The semi-autonomous heads thrashing wildly as they lashed out with savage teeth. The whip couldn't pile on bonus afflictions like the dagger but a single special attack could be delivered once for each of the five heads. The targets were somewhat random amongst whichever enemies were in range but that was only a minor disadvantage.

The whip could also be used to intercept attacks. Having the hydra's property of regeneration, it quickly recovered from most damage. Only the fire attacks of one of the bronze-rankers and the searing light from the silver-ranker's attacks left lingering damage.

Jason largely left the silver-ranker alone. Thanh was hanging behind the others making ranged attacks instead of diving in, which was exactly what Jason wanted. He only made occasional feints in Thanh's direction so that he stayed on the move. So long as the silver-ranker didn't plant his feet to play as a rapid-fire turret, Jason could handle it. So long as he was careful, the bronze-rankers were a useful tool for interrupting the silver-ranker's sightlines.

Jason had seized the momentum of the combat and was not letting go. The problem for his enemies was not that they didn't know how to fight, as they had clearly received meticulous combat training. The problem was that combat training was derived from Earth methodologies. The way they moved, the way they fought, even the way they thought was based around a paradigm on a baseline human, with the powers incorporated as an addendum.

At iron-rank, that wasn't too much of a liability, but bronze was the point where an essence user truly became more than human. If they continued to think and fight like a human, they were wasting huge portions of their potential.

Jason had been trained as an essence user from the ground up. The confluence of attributes, perception and powers worked together to comprise a series of force multipliers, the results of which demonstrated exactly what made Farrah and himself so valuable to the Network. It wasn't just improved meditation techniques to get people off cores but a holistic method of going from ordinary warrior to magical weapon.

Jason's enemies suffered a disconnect between their powers, their physical abilities and the way they sought to use them. They looked buffoonish next to Jason, who was combining and interweaving powers. He relied on his enhanced perception over his ordinary senses. His every motion made use of his superhuman agility and flexibility. Each physical attack was delivered with an appreciation of the power he could put behind it and the strain his body could take in landing it.

His enemies had the potential but they squandered it. They were humans with abilities while Jason was a superhuman, through and through. The results were stark, as even without shadows or pulling out his familiars, he gave the bronze-rankers a brutal education on the differences in approach.

Even so, a less-than-stellar silver-ranker was still a silver-ranker. The ability to banish shadows truly was an impediment to Jason, even if it wasn't the defining factor his



opponent had anticipated. Like his subordinates, Thanh squandered much of his potential, but a silver-ranker had far more potential to squander.

Thanh was clearly a ranged attacker, staying back and flinging beams of light and crystal shards in Jason's direction. He clearly wasn't as secure as he should be in his silver-rank resilience, wasting his silver rank strength. If he had moved in hard on Jason with his superior strength, toughness and reflexes, he would have prevented Jason from going wild on the bronze-rankers at least. Instead, Jason used the bronze-rankers as cover and shields to intercept Thanh's ranged attacks.

The ability to use the bronze-rankers as human shields was just the beginning. Jason loaded them up with afflictions, hitting them with spells even as he danced amongst them. They were incubators for the afflictions building up, each one charging the protective power of Jason's amulet.

Despite his superiority, Jason went far from unscathed. As many hits as he avoided, there were just too many enemies and much of his fight was about minimising hits that couldn't be dodged. The relatively weak-but-rapid attacks from the silver-ranker alone packed a dangerous punch against Jason, even in his magic armour.

If Thanh had challenged Jason alone, he would have had a very good chance of winning. With silver-rank powers, silver-rank attributes and the power to deny any shadows, he held no shortage of advantages. The bronze-rankers seemed like another advantage, but they were, in fact, the equalisers.

The crucial thing that made the bronze-rankers liabilities to their leader was that they were the means by which Jason could endure hit after hit. Each affliction Jason incubated on the bronze-rankers added a shield to Jason's amulet. As Thanh punched through the shields, they transformed into healing. Jason's Leech Bite attack drained health to further top him off. When that wasn't enough, his Feast of Blood gave a burst of drain-healing. If it still wasn't enough, he drained the afflictions from a bronze-ranker. His Sin Eater power turned every affliction he drained into ongoing recovery of health, stamina and mana.

With each bronze-ranker that he drained, Jason's regeneration grew stronger. The downside was that as each enemy succumbed to the holy afflictions left in place of the original ones, it became easier for Thanh to land hits.

Once the bronze-rankers were all dead, there were no more obstacles to Thanh's attacks. In spite of this, the precision of his attacks dropped as his frustration rose. It had reached the point where Jason's armour was ragged and he should have died a dozen times over. Jason had fed on the life force of the bronze-rankers and used them to build up

an absurd level of regeneration. If Jason didn't have them to use, Thanh's chances would have been far better.

Despite all of that, defeating a silver-ranker was no mean feat. Even if Thanh was getting sloppy, Jason was out of human shields and Thanh's attacks were outpacing his healing. Jason focused on trying to take down Thanh but the man had a number of slippery movement powers. It slowed down his attacks to use them, but it didn't stop them altogether.

If not for extensive training with Sophie, Jason would have been at a loss to counter the man's speed. As it was, he wasn't landing hits, only applying as much pressure as he could, employing every trick he knew to fight a faster opponent. The key was forcing them into rapid direction changes, which exhausted them much faster.

Energy attrition was not wildly effective against Sophie, whose endurance almost matched Jason's. While a silver-ranker's endurance was formidable, Jason could sense it slowly but surely diminishing. For his part, the same effects that restored Jason's health were keeping his mana and stamina topped off.

The goal was to tire the silver-ranker out, getting him to pause long enough to spray him down with Colin and move the fight into the end game. The man clearly knew Jason's tactics and would be aware of his most dangerous familiar, thus would not let himself be blindsided. Only by forcing the situation would Jason use Colin effectively, and missing would mean the silver-ranker could easily avoid him.

Things were not going Jason's way, as Thanh had his own plan. While Jason was trying to run out the clock of Thanh's mana, Thanh wanted to overwhelm Jason's health regeneration before that happened. The silver-ranker had the attribute advantage and things were going his way.

Amongst Thanh's suite of powers was a burst of ultra speed, such as Sophie, Rufus and Danielle Geller all shared. Thanh appeared to lack any big-hit powers but it allowed him to cue up an array of projectiles to fire the moment the power ended. From training with Rufus and Sophie, Jason recognised the telltale blur and threw himself out of the way, but there was no truly dodging that level of speed. Each time it happened, Jason was ravaged with attacks. The only blessing was that each use was a devastating drain on Thanh's mana.

As Thanh landed hit after hit, Jason felt the jaws of death growing ever closer. Rather than let them feast, Jason chose to turn the tables and feast on death instead. He paused, startling Thanh enough that a light beam missed wildly as Jason chanted out a spell.

*"As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest."*

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Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain).
  - Cost: Low mana.
  - Cooldown: None.
  
  - Current rank: Bronze 6 (09%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.
  
  - Effect (bronze): Affects all enemy corpses in a wide area.
- 

The bronze-rankers were half-rotted away, half dissolved into nothingness as Jason had not used his finisher on any of them. Thanh watched in horror as the blood-red glow of their remnant life rose up from their bodies and was drained into Jason, a series of bloody trails moving through the air and seeping into Jason's body.

Thanh's senses told him that under the ragged armour and bloodied skin, Jason was more than just physically recovered. Jason's mana and stamina had already been diminishing far slower than Thanh's own and now both pools were completely replenished.

Thanh was not yet fully exhausted but had thrown no shortage of mana at Jason in the form of magical attacks. All his hyper-speed burst attacks had been undone, leaving only their mana deficit behind. As he watched Jason fully restore himself using the ruined carcasses that had only minutes ago been his team, Thanh's will broke.

Jason felt the moment his opponent's morale crumpled as the man's aura turned to glass. Jason slammed his own aura down like a hammer, shattering that glass to pieces as Thanh had been activating a movement power, trying to flee. His aura, now a paper tiger, collapsed under Jason's assault.

Thanh felt a sensation unlike any he had experienced, like a knife pressed against the throat of his soul. He could sense that it would dig in if he moved even the tiniest bit in the wrong direction, flooding him with fear.

Thanh froze on the spot, hearing footsteps slowly approach from behind on the gravel road. The light from his aura was gone but motes of light flew out from Jason's cloak to bathe the road in starlight.

"I think we need to return to our previous conversation," Jason said, his voice a glacial inexorability. "You need to tell me why you violated the International Committee's edict."

"I don't know," Thanh said. "They just told me to capture you."

Jason only scraped a pinprick against Thanh's soul but it was the most violating thing the man had ever experienced. He shrieked in fear and pain, even though the sensation lasted but a fraction of a second.

"I really don't know!" Thanh begged. "They tracked your boat, that's how they knew you were coming. That's all I know, I swear!"

Thanh still couldn't see Jason standing behind him and his aura senses were clamped down by Jason's aura suppression. As for his magic senses, with the absence of the light, Shade was once again masking Jason's presence. This left Thanh's nerves rising toward panic, as all he could sense was the razor claw gripping his soul.

"I'm not going to kill you," Jason said finally. "You should be doing your real job, which is not trying to hunt me down. It's protecting people from the dangers they don't even know are there and your power is too valuable to lose from that fight. I suggest you go back to your job and be very, very diligent about carrying it out."

The pressure suddenly vanished from Thanh, who immediately shot off like a rocket. A path of light spread out under his feet as he fled with all the speed he could muster.

"Shade," Jason said. "Have Farrah tell the Network what happened. Make sure they buy up the recordings of all these people. Tell them to be generous about it, too. They could use the money."

"I imagine the Network will want to speak to you."

"I don't want to speak to them. Remind them that part of the agreement was that the Network would stop coming after me and let them know that if they are going to be sloppy about the terms, then so will I."

"I don't think they'll like that," Shade said.

"I'm done caring about what people like," Jason said. "If they want something from me, they can pay for it."

The stars from Jason's cloak that were floating around him returned to the cloak, then dimmed down to nothing. The street was once again plunged into darkness.

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"...should be doing your real job, which is not trying to hunt me down. It's protecting people from the dangers they don't even know are there..."

Adrien Barbou closed the video file with a sigh, created a folder and moved the file into it. He pressed a button on his desk.

"Fiona, please arrange a meeting with Mrs. West at her earliest convenience."

## Chapter 342

### All I Can Do is My Best

Jason walked down the single street of the dilapidated, West African township. Buildings of clay brick and rusted, corrugated iron were silent and the streets empty. The only people he could see were amongst the tents set up at the far end of the town, where people in hazmat suits were bustling about. They had too much to do, too few people to do it and too little to do it with.

He made his way down the dusty street, the heat pounding down like a blacksmith's hammer. It wasn't until he drew close to the tan tents, set up in neat rows that the busy humanitarian workers noticed him. A hazmat-suited woman rapidly approached and started yelling at him in French.

"What the hell do you think you're..."

She trailed off as she met his eyes, seeing their silver colour.

"Are you him?" she asked.

"Yeah," Jason said. "Who are you?"

"Dr Chloe Baudrillard. What do I call you?"

"It's probably best I don't leave a name. It's one less thing when people come asking about me."

"People are going to come asking?"

"Once you see what I can do, that won't seem strange."

"I've heard the stories. From people I trust, but it doesn't seem possible."

"A place like this could use a little impossible, don't you think?" he asked.

"You're damn right it could. If you can do what they say..."

"I can. But only for as long as people don't come looking for me," Jason said.

"I was told that keeping quiet was your rule but I can't promise that we can stop people from talking," she said. "All I was told was to give you whatever you need and stay out of your way. But as I said, people talk, and I've heard about the man with the silver eyes."

"I'm not looking to build a legend," Jason said. "I'm just looking to help people. The goal is to do as much good as we can for as long as we can, right?" Jason asked.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, it is. So what do you need?"

"Some privacy and all the sick people you've got."

She led Jason forward, but after a short distance, he stopped.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

"I need to see someone," he said. "Go to where I need to be and I'll find you."

She frowned, turned to look at the tents and then back to Jason but he was already gone.

"What the... does he think he's Batman?"

Elsewhere in the camp, Jason stood outside a tent and let a little of his aura show. Shortly thereafter, another hazmat suited woman appeared, this one with a bronze-rank aura.

"So you're here," she said.

"Yes."

"You realise that the Network isn't exactly slacking off on this, right? We are helping. We just aren't making a spectacle of it."

"I respect that," Jason said. "We're both working in secret, only at different points on the scale. The simple fact is, secrecy is costing lives."

"If the secret comes out, you think it will make things easier once the world descends on us?"

"This isn't a hospital full of camera phones and media saturation," Jason said. "We have leeway here and we should use it."

"You think we don't want to march through here, raising people up off their sickbeds? We have to look beyond today, to the next outbreak and the next one. Plus, there's only so much mana to go around."

Jason plucked a wooden box out of the air, sliding off the lid to reveal stacks of bronze-rank coins.

"Would this help?"

The woman didn't answer for a moment as she looked at the coins, then shook her head as if to clear it.

"You're willing to just hand these over?"

"You want some iron ones as well? Actually, give me a list of everywhere I can find Network personnel working on this and I'll make some drop-offs."

"That's very generous," she said. "It doesn't change the fact that what you're doing puts us all in jeopardy."

"You could look at it as a safety precaution," Jason said. "if anyone latches on to your activities, you can pass it off as the work of the magic healer roaming around."

"It's not as simple as you make out," she said.

"It never is. All I can do is my best, based on what I know and what I can do."

"Well," she said. "I don't like what you're up to but it's not like I can stop it. And I am going to take these coins."

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Jason walked into the large tent, Chloe beside him in her hazmat suit. There were people laid out in rows, letting out a discord of feeble moans.

"Are you sure you want to see?" he asked. "Once you do, you'll never see the world in the same way again."

"You think I should choose ignorance?"

"As a rule, no, but it's not so easy to pick up your regular life after peeking behind the curtains of the universe."

"Just do what you came here to do."

"Alright," Jason said.

Jason moved to the first patient, who was agitated and delirious. The man's aura was in chaos and Jason used his own to guide it back to calm. After months of practising, his aura control had eclipsed his abilities of the past.

From Chloe's perspective, Jason's mere presence calmed the man, lulling him into sleep. Then it passed through the room like a wave, the pitiful moans dropping away. Then Jason raised his hand, speaking words in a language she didn't recognise.

Red light started glowing from within the patient and Chloe's attention was transfixed. Looking at the light felt like looking at the man's beating heart, although it was stained with black taint. As she watched, the taint seeped out of the light, streaming up into Jason's waiting hand. It only stopped once the red light was clean, at which point it retracted into the man's body. Still unconscious, the patient looked immediately better.

Chloe looked on in disbelief as Jason went through the patients, one by one. He didn't so much as glance at her until he had gone through every patient.

"You have more tents, right?"

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Despite their misgivings, the aid workers had cleared out to let Jason loose on the patients after getting implausible but emphatic word from other camps. Now that he was gone, they were swarming over the patients, running tests multiple times out of raw disbelief. Chloe suspected that she herself was in some stage of shock, the unreality of it all being disorienting. She hadn't run tests to check the results of the strange man's actions but every instincts told her that the stories she heard were true.

"What you did in there, I can't explain," she told Jason at the edge of the camp. "It looked like you were healing people with a magic spell."

“It did, didn’t it?”

“You were right,” she said. “I’m not sure how to just move on after what I saw.”

“I imagine you’ll be busy in the next little while. By the time you have a chance to stop and think about it, you can just pass it off as some weird trick.”

“I don’t think that’s going to work. Not if you really cured those people. Was that you in Sydney, last year? Healing all those kids at the hospital.”

“I try to be more circumspect, now, but...”

They both turned to look at the frenzy of activity in the camp.

“Sometimes people just need helping,” she said.

“Yeah,” Jason agreed.

“Are you going to more camps?”

“Of course.”

“I won’t keep you, then,” she said. “There’s no shortage of people that need you.”

He narrowed his eyes at her.

“You’re really not going to ask, are you?” he said.

“Ask what?”

“You know what.”

“You can tell?”

“I can feel it in your aura.”

“Oh, my aura.”

“You just watched me heal the sick by casting spells, but auras are where you draw the line? I’m not talking about the aura photographs you can get in a new age shop.”

Jason let his aura gently brush against hers, another example of his new level of delicacy. He was unable to hide the intrinsic properties of his aura when projecting it in such a way, however. She felt the domineering nature of his aura power, Hegemony, along with the unyielding resolve that came from all that his soul had endured.

“So that’s you,” she said after recovering from the strange sensation.

“There are more jokes than my aura might imply.”

“I think it’s time for you to go,” she said.

“Why didn’t you ask me to heal you?”

“You’ve given us miracles enough. What’s a little cancer next to what these people are going through? I can go home and do all the chemo I like. All they can do is lay there and hope not to die. You should be moving on to more of them.”

Jason gave her a warm smile and held up a hand, repeating the chant in the language she didn’t understand.



As with the patients before her, her red life force was brought out, cleansed and returned to her. She felt like a fresh breeze had just passed through her whole body.

“You’re a good egg, Chloe Baudrillard.”

He plucked a pen and notebook from thin air, scribbling a note and tearing out the page before handing it to her.

“You’ll be busy with this for a while, but when you’re done, come find me. I’ll show you how to heal in ways you never imagined. You do want to do what I just did, right?”

“You’re saying I could...”

“Some variation on it, yes. If I show you how.”

She looked down at the paper in her hand.

“Jason Asano,” she read.

“That’s my name,” he said. “I’d appreciate you keeping it under your hat.”

She looked up from the paper, her eyes searching his face for answers.

“Why me?”

“Because you didn’t ask,” he said.

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A black UTV, something between a quad bike and a car, was moving along a road of red dirt, between vibrantly green bushes and trees. The man in the driver seat was not driving but instead narrating to the recording crystal floating over his head.

Losing power due to low levels of ambient magic was a problem for magic items, especially weaker and cheaper ones like recording crystals. Fortunately, Jason’s inventory was able to replenish the depleted magic of objects, so long as Jason himself wasn’t mana-starved. Since his transfiguration, Jason’s more spiritual nature meant that he no longer needed spirit coins to keep his magic levels up, or even consume them for food, so that was not an issue. The steady trickle of power from the astral he now enjoyed sustained him both physically and magically.

“You could use a non-magical recording solution,” Shade suggested as Jason put the recording crystal away.

“Recording crystals adjust to the movement of the vehicle so there isn’t a jiggled image,” Jason said.

“Are you suggesting my suspension system is insufficient?” Shade asked.

“Not in the least,” Jason said. “This is as comfortable a ride as I could hope. As always, Shade, you excel.”

As they continued on, a magic item on the passenger seat began glowing with silver light and made a low hum. It looked something like an oversized compass.

“It’s not even two o’clock and this is the second one today,” Jason said, picking up the device. The grid compass was something Farrah had devised after digging into the nature of the Network’s detection grid. There was some resistance to giving her access from certain elements of the Network, but that changed as sections of the grid started experiencing failures. At that point, Farrah became a valued part of a multi-branch investigative task force.

When it started happening, Jason had offered to return immediately.

“Not wanting to seem rude,” Farrah said, “but you won’t actually be able to help. This is an array magic thing and you just don’t have the expertise.”

“The grid involves astral magic too, right?”

“Yes, but the astral magic part works fine. It’s the bones that need looking at. Not everything is about you, Jason.”

The grid compass alerted Jason to proto-space formations in the vicinity by tapping into the grid. At the pivot-point of the needle was a crystal that glowed different colours, according to the strength. Smaller crystals gave a rough indication of distance by how many lit up.

“Seventy clicks,” Jason said. “Silver rank, too.”

The UTV pulled to a stop and Jason got out, returning the charging plate to his inventory. The vehicle transformed into a cloud of darkness, most of which disappeared into Jason’s shadow. The remainder took the form of Shade.

“My supply of coins is getting low,” Shade said. “I’ll need more if we’re going to fly.”

“Ask and ye shall receive, my friend,” Jason said, producing a box of coins.

Neither Shade nor Jason needed coins due to the low-magic conditions, although Jason still needed coins if he wasn’t consuming large amounts of food. He had no shortage since he was interceding in proto-spaces at least once and often two or even three times daily. What Shade did need coins for was to supplement high-energy forms like flying vehicles. Only once he was silver-rank would Shade be able to fly in an energy-efficient manner.

When he jumped in on proto-spaces, Jason was leaving behind the bulk of the silver-rank loot for the locals and satisfying himself with bronze-rank spoils. Leaving behind the best goodies with no work required for the Network made for exasperated responses from the local branches, but no actual complaints. Not since leaving China, anyway.

“Actually,” Jason said, pulling a completed recording crystal from his inventory, “take this too, please.”

Shade put the coins and the crystal in his own dimensional space. It was significantly smaller than Jason's but could be accessed through any of his bodies. This meant that Jason could send his recording to his niece via Shade. She sent him back gifts in return, like biscuits she made with her mother.

Shade then took the form of a new vehicle, an ultralight trike. Basically a seat with a motor behind it, with glider wings over the top, it was also black with a few white embellishments.

"I'm not sure black is especially safety-conscious," Jason said.

"I could transform into a regular tricycle instead," Shade said.

"No, this is good," Jason said.

Using the road as a runway, they were soon soaring over the landscape. Seventy kilometres would be roughly a half-hour trip.

"I know its probably time to be looking towards heading home," Jason said, enjoying the wind flowing over him. "I'm having an absolute blast, though. I would love to bring Erika's family on a trip like this. Minus the monster-slaying and horrifying misery of the plague camps, obviously."

"You have responsibilities, as vaguely defined as they are, right now," Shade said. "I believe that Dawn will eventually contact you again for further explanation, and the failures in the grid are an increasing concern. The two factors may not be unrelated."

"I was thinking the same thing. I don't want to leave while this outbreak is still ongoing, though. It's nice to use what I can do to help solve a non-magical problem that affects so many people. It's exactly what I imagined back in Greenstone."

## Chapter 343

### A Modern Myth

“...spokespersons from Médecins Sans Frontières and the World Health Organisation have both dismissed claims of miracle healing, stating that the success in containing the outbreak is due to experience and the protocols established during the 2013-2016 outbreak. Evangelical aid group Samaritan’s Purse has officially echoed these statements, but unnamed sources within the organisation have made reference to what they describe as divine visitations...”

Mr North paused the recording playing on the wall monitor. The Four Cardinals of the EOA, Mr North, Mrs South, Mr East and Mrs West were seated around a square table. Lined up on the opposite wall to the large monitor were their various subordinates.

“Preparations are taking longer than expected,” Mr North said. “We need to reassess our response to Asano’s activities.”

“Before we start looking towards action, we need a revised time frame for our agenda,” Mrs South said. “When will we be ready to act?”

“Disabling the grid is proving more difficult than anticipated,” Mr East said. “To date, we have been successful in shutting off only localised areas.”

He glanced at Adrien Barbou, standing against the wall with Mrs West’s other flunkies.

“The information provided by Mrs West’s new subordinate has been useful in accelerating our progress in that regard. Our problems have come in enacting a wide-scale loss of grid functionality.”

“Surmountable problems, I assume, or you would have reported your inability to complete your task to us,” Mrs West said.

“Our original estimates were based on the scale of the grid,” Mr East explained. “Only once we attempted to scale up did we discover the key issue. The grid appears to have some manner of self-repair function. Whoever originally devised it apparently anticipated localised failures and developed a system by which surrounding areas compensate and restore the damaged areas. The Lyon branch had to repeatedly disable the grid to hide the astral space that formed in Saint-Étienne.”

“And the solution?” Mr North asked.

“The same thing that is impeding us will also enable us to achieve our goal with less direct intervention than originally anticipated. We have been making attacks on grid infrastructure, disabling various sectors around the world as we mapped out the nodes

critical to the self-repair function. Once we've identified them, then simultaneous strikes on these critical nodes will cause the entire infrastructure to fail."

"What about the risks of this mapping process?" Mrs South asked.

"Obviously," Mr East said, "this has come at the risk of exposing our activities to the Network. Their response teams are active but our contacts within the Network have kept them from intercepting our activities. Mrs West's new associate maintains a number of Network contacts and has been useful in this regard."

The cardinals glanced at Barbou, standing against the wall with the others.

"If the Network traces your activities back to us before we act, they will intervene," Mrs South said. "Again, I ask for a timeline. Our original intention was to have made our move by now. How much longer do we have to risk discovery?"

"I anticipate two more months," Mr East said.

"Very well," Mr North said. "Mrs West, will you add your resources to Mr East's efforts, in order to keep the Network from drawing too close while he completes his work?"

"I will," Mrs West acceded.

"Then that leads us back to the issue of Jason Asano. Now that our time estimates have been extended, we need to revisit the impact of his activities on our intentions. He is far more brazen than the Network about employing his capabilities and that is entering the public consciousness. Thus far, the attention had been minimal and contained but we need to formulate a response before that impacts our own goals negatively. I know you have each had your people analysing the issue, so I suggest we listen to the potential responses they have devised."

The other cardinals nodded their assent.

"Very well," Mr North said, turning to one of his own subordinates. "Keenan, we'll begin with you. What is your proposed response?"

One of Mr North's subordinates stepped forward.

"The mistake that every person to antagonise Asano has made," he said confidently, glancing at Barbou, "is that they have always employed half-measures. Asano needs to be dealt with using direct and overwhelming force. I have developed a proposal by which we incite the Network branches here in the US to eliminate Asano using their own category threes. We already know that the US elite operatives have superior capabilities, commensurate with Asano. Unlike the category threes of the French and Vietnamese, Asano will be unable to overcome one of them, let alone multiples."

"You advocate elimination," Mr North said.

"I do, sir. If you'll allow, I can elaborate on my plans to spur the US branches into action, predicated on Asano's known anti-American prejudice."

"Perhaps before that," Mrs West interjected, "we might hear from an alternative perspective."

"Agreed," Mrs South said.

"Very well," Mr North said.

"Adrien," Mrs West said. "Please share your proposal."

Barbou stepped forward, throwing Keenan a glance as Mr North's subordinate stepped back.

"To contextualise my proposal," Barbou said, "I feel I should first respond to the idea of employing direct force against Asano. Frankly, that is the most idiotic path we could conceivably pursue. Every man, woman or force that has been pitted against Asano has fallen short, myself included. He's been outranked, outnumbered, ambushed, suppressed and blown up. The last category three we know to have confronted him not only stood above him in rank but possessed specific counters to Asano's key abilities. That man did not suffer so much as a scratch at Asano's hands, yet to this day, he remains terrified at the idea of ever encountering him again."

Barbou threw another look at Keenan.

"I'm not saying that I believe Asano could defeat a team of category three elites from the US Network."

He turned his gaze back to the cardinals.

"The point is that I neither over nor underestimate Asano. Putting him down might work. Might. But that is not a reliable basis on which to move forward. Assuming nothing goes wrong in my associate's plan to push the Network into mobilising some of their most powerful assets, Asano would definitely not defeat them. But does he need to? Victory may not be possible, but escape might be. We already know that he is highly elusive, even from category three senses."

Barbou panned his gaze across the cardinals.

"Asano can demonstrably poach from any dimensional incursion at will and seems to be doing so for the purpose of growing stronger. Right now he's remaining relatively predictable, but if he wanted to be more evasive about it, he certainly could be. I can't speak for you, but I don't want that man out there going hardcore guerrilla warfare, building up his strength in the darkness, waiting for the moment to hit back."

He once more looked to Keenan.

"What do we do if we strike out and miss, only for him to come back stronger than ever? Right now, his power is limited but incredibly strong for his rank. Do you want to take that man on at category three? I don't. What do we do if it reaches that point? Convince the US networks to bring one of their category fours out of stasis?"

"You know about those?" Mr North asked. "The Americans were only participating in the debate over resources to create category fours to hide that they already have them and that they're useless without gold spirit coins. I didn't realise the international branches were aware of that."

"It's not widely known," Barbou said. "There have always been rumours within the Network. I just happen to know that they are true."

Keenan snorted derision.

"You're so well informed about the US branches?" he asked. "You French are a bunch of second-raters compared to the Network branches here. Why would we believe that you knew anything?"

Barbou gave Keenan the smile he would give an obnoxious child he was trying to indulge so they wouldn't throw a tantrum.

"As a whole," Barbou explained, "Americans dislike the French. Individually, however, American women like French men and American men like French women. When chosen well, of course. Their operational security is far less stringent than the United States branches like to tell themselves."

A smile played across Mr North's lips.

"An issue the Americans have had with multiple countries," he said. "Their field operatives are solid, but their management has had... issues."

"My proposal," Barbou said finally, "is the exact opposite of bringing the hammer down. We help Asano."

Aside from Mrs West, that earned raised eyebrows from the cardinals.

"I'm intrigued," Mrs South said. "Please expand on that."

"We don't need to stop what Asano is doing," Barbou said. "We need to change the way we look at the situation. We're worried about him stealing our thunder, but there's plenty of thunder to go around. So long as he isn't forced to go public before we're ready, he's laying the groundwork for everything we need to do."

"You're saying we use him," Mr North said.

"Exactly. When the time comes, we reap the benefits of every child he rescues from earthquake damage and camp full of sick people he cures. All we have to do is make sure that he stays a rumour, while still working his way into the public consciousness."

“A modern myth,” Mr North said.

“Precisely. The Network has all the government influence but we have the media power, which is exactly what we need. We spin Asano, let him prime the pump for when we draw the water. And if he needs to be dealt with then, we let the public do it. We have footage of Asano killing people in nicely graphic ways.”

Mrs South narrowed her eyes at Barbou.

“You were the one who prompted the Vietnamese to go after him, aren’t you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Barbou said with a smile. “I was just fortunate enough to get a hold of the footage before the Network eliminated it all.”

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Flying through the sky on Shade, the ultralight trike, Jason felt it as he approached the region coterminous to the proto-space and put away the grid compass.

“Alright, Shade,” he said as his cloak manifested around him. Shade’s vehicle form turned into darkness and returned to Jason’s body as the starlight cloak swept out like wings of night and Jason started gliding. Shade could not transition into the astral space, even hidden in Jason’s shadow as he normally was. Only when fully unmanifested could Jason carry his familiars across.

Gliding through the air, Jason let his aura bleed into the ambient magic. Spending time around proto-spaces had actually been excellent for his aura control, with his aura being the means he used to insinuate himself through the dimensional membrane. He felt out the dimensional barrier separating Earth’s physical reality and the proto-space, then passed through it like a curtain of water.

Gliding through the air, the African landscape sprawled out below him blurred and was replaced with an entirely different vista. The terrain below him was now a snow-strewn taiga, looking more like Russia than Africa, although one feature was native to neither. Odd, alien ziggurats dotted the landscape, dusted white with snow.

Shade re-emerged, retaking the form of the ultralight trike, already in flight. Settling back into the seat, Jason pulled out a computer tablet. This was the standard issue magitech tracker that the Network used to track the anchor dimensional entities that were the key to containing proto-spaces. Shade did the flying as Jason navigated them in the direction of their targets.

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Shelia was the Director of Tactical Operations for the network’s Monrovia branch and was first through the aperture once the ritual team cracked it open. The taiga terrain was



fairly hospitable, albeit cold after arriving from an African late summer. She immediately started organising the teams that followed.

After the sweeper teams secured the area around the aperture on the inside of the proto-space, the support teams were brought in and started setting up camp. Assessments were quickly made.

“Director,” one of Shelia’s subordinates said as he approached. “The detectors aren’t registering an anchor entity. We can move straight on to farming the rest of the monsters. Also, the stability readings say the space will hold for more than sixty hours.”

“He’s still here,” Shelia said. “Was there any indication that anyone else had opened the aperture?”

“None. I would go as far as to say that there was definitively no prior use of the aperture.”

Shelia sighed.

“How is he getting in and out?” she mused.

“I could just leave through the aperture you’ve conveniently opened up there,” Jason said, emerging from the shadow of an awning set up by the support teams. A dozen guns were instantaneously pointed at him.

“Harsh,” he said. “Lovely to see you again, Shelia.”

“I take it that you have dealt with the anchor dimensional entity, Mr Asano?”

“Actually, it was a triple, so I snagged a few silver spirit coins for myself. I still left most of them for you, of course. They were all on top of those weird ziggurats, so you shouldn’t have any trouble finding the loot. I did take an essence for myself, though. I didn’t realise that a hair essence was a thing, so I couldn’t help myself. I did leave you that sun essence the other day, so I don’t feel super bad. Do you think I could do a Medusa confluence with this hair essence? Probably add in snake and earth, is what I’m thinking.”

Shelia plastered on a transparently false smile.

“We’ve been instructed to extend you every courtesy, Mr Asano. By all means, feel free to immediately depart via the aperture.”

“Well, gee, Shelia. You almost make a guy feel unwanted.”

“I’ve been specifically directed not to express that sentiment.”

“Oh, you have?”

“Yes.”

“Someone felt the need to go out of their way to tell you to not tell me that my presence was unwanted?”

“They did.”

“They mustn’t be aware of our great dynamic.”

“They are. The aperture is right there, Mr Asano.”

## Chapter 344

### Breakneck Pace

"Do have any idea of the disarray you've thrown my life into?" Chloe asked.

Outside of her hazmat suit, she had plain, blockish features and light clothes for the Moroccan heat. She was sitting with Jason at a teahouse in Marrakech.

"Oh, I'm well aware of how magical revelations in the middle of a crisis can throw you off. Whether you sink or swim teaches you a lot about yourself."

"Well, thank you," Chloe said. "While I may have felt like I was going insane for a while, I can't begin to express our gratitude for what you've done. For me, obviously, but the outbreak went from potentially years to months."

"I'm just a man who happened to have a useful gift," Jason said. "It's the people who don't have my advantages yet throw everything into helping others that truly warrant praise. The ones working day in and day out, putting themselves at risk. You and your colleagues can't just magic away sickness. Not to mention that there are others like me, working on less self-aggrandising and more long-term efforts."

"I was surprised that you found me here," she said. "I intended to go find you in Australia, once I'd been home."

"I just happened to be in Marrakech and sensed your presence."

"You sensed my presence? One person in a whole city?"

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#### Ability: [Midnight Eyes] (Dark)

- Special ability (perception).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): See through darkness.
- Effect (bronze): Sense magic.
- Effect (silver): Enhanced aura senses.
  
- Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached silver rank.

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Perception powers were always the first to rank up and Jason's ongoing aura control practise had caused his perception power to even further outpace his other abilities. The effect of a silver-rank perception power enhancing his aura senses was far more impactful

than he realised. Combined with the raw strength of his soul and his semi-spiritual nature both enhancing those senses already, the effect was a level of sensory overload that left him almost debilitated for the better part of a week.

The attribute that governed perception was spirit, and while Jason's was in the upper echelons of bronze, it wasn't enough for him to handle the explosion of sensory input when his power crossed the threshold into silver. Fortunately, it took place as he meditated in a random patch of African wilderness, far from prying eyes and ill intentions.

It was like going from black and white to colour as he realised that the aura senses he already had were crude and oblivious. He could now sense the auras of everything around him. He had thought that only living things with souls had auras, with some magic-based exceptions, but the trees, grass, even the wind had echoes of aura.

It wasn't the true auras he was already aware of but some kind of intrinsic nature related to the interplay of physical reality and the astral that lay hidden beyond it. He suspected that his own nature gave him some unique insight that perhaps others might not share.

His familiars had stood guard as he spent days acclimatising to his new senses. After so long working on aura control, he found his senses to be powerful enough that he now required sensory control. The advancement of his perception ability did more than enhance sensitivity. He now had much more control of how all his senses operated. This only added to the disorientation as he grew used to it.

While he needed to be more conscious of his senses, as he got used to the changes he realised just how much of a difference it would be. His hearing could filter out sounds and focus on distant noises. His vision could adjust to see or ignore different light spectrums. His smell and taste could block out specific sensations, which was critically useful given his new sensitivity.

The most overwhelming aspect of his new aura sense was the sheer range. His unique advantages and the raw soul power he possessed allowed his senses to spread over a huge distance. If he had been in a city instead of the empty wilderness, he would have half-expected a brain aneurysm.

After the initial onslaught of sensation, he spent hour after hour, day after day in meditation as he brought his senses under control. The initial experience was like being in a kaleidoscope at a heavy metal concert held in a compost silo. Over the course of a week, he learned to draw back and filter the raw sensations and started to explore the potential of his newly enhanced senses.

Auras, he discovered, were far more sophisticated and nuanced than he previously realised. He had become satisfied with his aura control after months of practise, only to realise that he was only beginning to master control. His new awareness revealed how far he had yet to go.

In the week he spent in the wilderness, working on his sensory control, he had dropped off the radar of those tracking his activities. He stopped poaching proto-spaces and appearing at humanitarian aid stations. He decided it was for the best, at least regarding the outbreak.

The outbreak was being brought under control to the point that his contributions would no longer be worth the attention they brought, especially as there was an increasing movement on the internet connecting his various activities. Despite not using his cloak, the connection was being made between his camp visits and the Starlight Angel persona that had dominated the Australian media nine months earlier.

Jason refocused on developing his abilities, starting with his new sensory power. He made quiet appearances in larger and larger population centres, learning to balance the sensitivity so he wouldn't get overwhelmed. He worked his way up to Marrakech and was getting ready to meet people when he recognised Chloe's aura and decided to say hello.

"No one is sure what to make of you," Chloe said. "None of the testing we've done in the wake of your activities makes any kind of sense. If we tried writing papers on it, they would never pass peer review. On myself, included. It's like the cancer was never there. I keep waiting to wake up and realise that it really is impossible and I was dreaming the whole thing."

"I was semi-convinced it was all me going insane until my friend died and brought me down to Earth," Jason said. "You'll actually meet her soon; she's on her way here now."

"Didn't you just say she died?"

"Yeah, but she got better. Eventually. I come back much quicker every time I die."

"What?"

Jason had pulsed his aura like a beacon as he sensed the plane arrive carrying Farrah and the others, along with sending enough bodies that Shade could take the form of a car large enough to carry them comfortably.

As they arrived outside the teahouse, Jason assessed their auras. Farrah was still in the early stages of silver rank, although her progression would largely stall until they found their way back to her homeworld. Erika and Ian were both midway through iron, having taken cores regularly in the time he'd been away. Emi's aura was still normal rank but he could sense some lingering magic attached to it.

Emi had frequently talked with Uncle Jason via Shade. She was especially excited about her ritual magic lessons with Farrah, which had taken the sting out of not being old enough for essences. She had recently moved onto some very basic practical elements, the residual effect of which Jason realised he was sensing.

Prior to his aura senses being enhanced, that wouldn't have been possible. He was even able to recognise that elements of her aura were still in flux. He suspected that once they stabilised, she would be ready for essences. He would need to examine her aura further to get a sense of how long that would be. He knew a simple ritual that could check, but he wanted to ask Farrah if high-rankers could just tell through their aura senses.

Farrah and Erika's family came in and spotted them, Jason and Chloe getting up to greet them. Emi lunged forward to trap Jason in a hug. As he wrapped his arms around his niece, he gave the others a bright smile.

"Dr Baudrillard, let me introduce you to my family," Jason said in French. "This is my sister, Erika, her husband, Ian and their daughter, um..."

Jason took on an absent-minded expression, then his face lit up with recollection.

"...Ellie," he said. "This is my niece Ellie."

"Bête comme ses pieds," Emi said to him.

"What do you mean, dumb as my feet?" Jason asked.

"It's a French insult," Chloe said after snorting a laugh.

Jason turned to Ian.

"Sorry, I didn't ask," he said. "How's your French, Ian?"

"It's fine, isn't it dear?" Erika said in French.

"Er... oui," Ian said.

"I'm fine with English," Chloe said, using the language by way of demonstration. She had only a slight accent.

"This is actually our daughter *Emi*," Erika correctly introduced. Emi was glaring at her uncle but had to lean back to do so, unwilling to relinquish her grip on him.

"And this is Farrah," Jason said, "who is my friend from an alternate reality."

"What?" Chloe asked.

"You know, Jason," Farrah said, "I think I'm coming around on not letting you introduce people to magic. You just love throwing the wildest stuff at them and watching them get confused."

"You should probably leave it to the professionals and just satisfy yourself watching reaction videos online," Emi said.

“Hey,” Jason said, mock-hurt. “Oh, and family, this is Dr Chloe Baudrillard, of Doctors Without Borders.”

“Lovely to meet you,” Erika said, shaking her hand, then moving over to hug Jason over the top of her daughter.

“You know, Jason,” Farrah said, “the Network doesn’t like you just arbitrarily offering magic to people.”

“Tell them that I don’t like that they occasionally try to kill and/or kidnap me,” Jason said.

“She told them to stick it up their—”

“Emil!” Erika scolded.

“They’re happy you told them at all,” Farrah said. “I think Anna sees you as a puppy resistant to toilet training.”

They settled in and arranged for drinks, Emi boxing Jason against the wall like she was afraid he’d run off. They had remained in contact via Shade, But it wasn’t the same as meeting up in person. Since Farrah had been heading to Greece to investigate a grid failure, she had brought along her new apprentice, knowing that Jason was only a hop across the Mediterranean. Since Emi’s parents were not going to just let their daughter traipse off to Europe, they decided to make a family reunion of it, after which they would return to Australia together.

Jason was eager to discuss the grid failures with Farrah, who had largely shut him out of the investigation to let him focus on getting his head right. In the wake of her captivity, he had supported her as much as he could as she slowly opened up. She recognised that what he needed was space to settle himself.

He could have made an issue of inserting himself into the problems with the grid but he knew she was doing what was best for him. He trusted her to call on him if he was actually needed.

Chloe departed, having her own travel plans. Before they parted ways, Jason reassured her that there were secrets and wonders waiting for her in Australia.

“She seems nice,” Erika said.

“She’s been sick,” Farrah said. “Did you heal her of something?”

Farrah’s senses were also enhanced enough to notice the lingering turbulence in Chloe’s aura.

“She had cancer,” Jason explained. “She decided to use what time she had to help people, which is why I wanted to help her.”

"She's been vetted by the Network, now," Farrah said. "They didn't turn up any problems."

"Gladys is actually excited to work with her," Ian said. He himself had been working with Gladys at the clinic following Jason's departure.

"Let's forget about all that for now," Jason said. "I've planned a family trip to the Ouzoud Waterfall. No monsters, no Network. Just some quality family time. I've seen some beautiful things while I've been out and about, and it'll be nice to see some more together."

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Alone in a sleeping cabin on the Network's private plane, Jason contemplated the journey now coming to an end. He had two goals starting out, the first of which was coming to terms with the feeling of being caught between two worlds. His need to reconcile the person he had become in the other world with who he needed to be in his original one was his main impetus for starting the journey.

Moving across Asia, through the Middle East and into Africa, it was fighting the outbreak where he finally felt things coming together. Bringing magic from one world to another in a way that wasn't about violence and death was exactly what he needed. It took him back to his early days in the other world, using his powers to heal people.

As his adventuring duties grew more pressing and the church of the Healer started living up to their responsibilities, that early motivation had fallen to the wayside. Now he had come back to that place, reclaiming some of the innocence he had drowned in blood. Not all the changes he went through in the other world were good ones.

It would take time and pressure to know if he'd really found the balance he sought when his journey started. For the moment he felt that he had, which was enough to be going on with. That left the secondary goal of advancing his abilities.

In the other world, whenever things got too much he would head out into the delta, clearing every adventure board he could find of monsters. It allowed him to channel all his negative feelings, venting them in a way that was at least a little productive. Those were the times he pushed himself the hardest, always rushing to the next monster.

This journey had not been exactly the same, but the ability to chase down proto-spaces instead of monster notices had the same side-benefit of grinding out the advancement of his abilities.

He had been back in his own world for nine months and bronze-rank for a year. Contrary to his expectations, his homeworld had not stalled out his advancement. The magically-saturated proto-spaces had even more monsters than the astral space in which he had reached bronze-rank. The problem was that, unlike the astral space, they weren't



disastrously escalating in power to match his growing strength. Few bronze-rank monsters posed a threat to his current skills and abilities.

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## Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: bronze
- Progression to silver rank: 72.5%

### Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Bronze 7].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Bronze 8].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Bronze 7].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Bronze 7].

### Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

- [Party Interface].
- [Defiant].
- [Spirit Vault].
- [Tactical Map].
- [Nirvanic Transfiguration].
- [Dark Rider].

### Essences (4/4)

#### Dark [Speed] (5/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Silver 0] 00%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Bronze 8] 97%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Bronze 8] 42%.
- [Hand of the Reaper] (special ability): [Bronze 8] 76%.
- [Shadow of the Reaper] (familiar): [Bronze 9] 04%.

#### Blood [Power] (5/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Bronze 7] 68%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Bronze 8] 86%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Bronze 7] 37%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Bronze 7] 98%.
- [Haemorrhage] (spell): [Bronze 8] 84%.

#### Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Bronze 8] 84%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Bronze 7] 66%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Bronze 7] 79%.
- [Hegemony] (aura): [Bronze 8] 24%.
- [Castigate] (spell): [Bronze 8] 83%.

#### Doom [Spirit] (5/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Bronze 8] 89%.
  - [Punition] (spell): [Bronze 8] 50%.
  - [Blade of Doom] (spell): [Bronze 8] 66%.
  - [Verdict] (spell): [Bronze 7] 11%.
  - [Avatar of Doom] (familiar): [Bronze 7] 91%.
- 

Jason had spent about a year and a quarter going from iron to bronze, which was a completely normal timeframe. The standard progression from bronze to silver was three years, although that was a highly flexible number. The two most impactful factors were opportunity and dedication. Monster surges could shave months off that time and Jason had experienced a private monster surge that had lasted for months. If it had come at the end of his progression through bronze instead of the beginning, he probably could have broken some kind of speed record. He wondered if Farrah knew what the record was.

The latter stages of a rank were much harder to push through than the early ones. If he kept up the pace he had taken up during his journey then he could probably close out bronze-rank in half a year. A year and a half for the entire rank was already a breakneck pace to reach silver, which he would be extremely happy with.

His concern was the warning they had received from Dawn. He needed to solve an issue that, ironically, would give him exactly what he needed. If the magical density of the proto-spaces escalated he would have the monsters he needed to halve his time to silver.

The repercussions, however, were not worth it. It would take time before the Network was ready to handle more powerful monsters and failing to shutdown proto-spaces would only accelerate the problem. He was concerned enough with the grid blackouts, and now that his time away was over, it was time to involve himself. As if in answer to his ruminations, there was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Jason said, having sensed Farrah on the other side, and she stepped inside.

“Alright,” Jason said. “Time to catch me up.”

## Chapter 345

### Grand Tour

"It's definitely sabotage," Farrah said. "The Network is convinced that the EOA is behind it and I have no reason to doubt them. They know the local politics a lot better than me."

"As it was explained to me," Jason said, "the EOA's agenda is built around the knowledge of magic going public. Are they tired of waiting and trying to accelerate the process?"

"That's the prevailing assumption," Farrah said. "Our best guess is that they're trying to get lucky and have a proto-space go uncaught while the grid is down in an area. That happening at the bottom of the ocean is one thing; we have crazy sailor stories in my world and we know monsters are real."

"But if it happens in the middle of a city..."

"Exactly. The grid has a self-repair function, so the blackouts don't last more than three or four days. If we don't start intercepting these attacks, though, sooner or later a proto-space will appear in an area where the grid has gone dark and we won't know until it's too late."

"I'm curious about the actual infrastructure of the grid," Jason said. "How does that work, exactly? Are there a bunch of secret chambers buried all around the world?"

"It's quite fascinating," Farrah said. "At least to someone with my specialty. It's unlike anything I've seen before. The locals barely understand it and neither do I. The more I study it, the more I learn, and world-ending consequences aside, I'm loving it. The principles on which the grid is built are as revelatory to my understanding of formation magic as those books you have are to astral magic. Probably more so."

"That's quite a claim. What makes it so unique?"

"The grid infrastructure isn't like a normal formation array of permanent ritual circles. Each node is enormous and not made from a ritual circle at all. It's like the landscape is somehow operating as a series of ritual circles. We're talking about nodes the size of cities, with elements made up of mountains, hills and rivers to function as giant formation arrays."

"Like feng shui or leylines or something."

"Exactly," Farrah said. "I've been reading up on those since I started investigating the grid. That Li Li Mei who tried to rope you onto China's team sent me some materials on Chinese geomancy. She asked about you, you know."

"What I have can't be taught," Jason said.

"Nor should it be. What about Asya?"

"That's not so easy," Jason said. "I mean, yes, she's smart, gorgeous and I must have been blind back in school. But there's an unfair dynamic when I can constantly sense her emotions."

"That should be less of an issue," Farrah said. "I made her a bracelet that gold-rankers with no aura control use to keep their auras from popping regular people's heads. She can't use her aura and it tamps down her own aura senses, but if she wears it around you, you shouldn't be able to read her. Not unless you actively try, anyway. Your aura senses must be monstrous now."

"You've got no idea," Jason said, then went on to explain his troubles adapting to his new sensory strength. Afterwards, they got back onto topic as Farrah continued to explain about how the grid functioned.

"These giant nodes in the landscape have the nuance and flexibility to adapt as the landscape shifts over the centuries. I'm still only starting to get my head around it. The brilliance it would take to devise a system like this is staggering."

"How do you build something like that into existing landscape?" Jason asked.

"I suspect that whoever built the grid actually shifted the landscape to make it work."

"That's possible? I know earth shaping is a thing, but that kind of scale? Again and again, all across the world?"

"A gold-ranker with the right powers and enough time could manage it. Eventually. From what records the Network has of their founder, it was a process of many years."

"The grid is low-level magic, though, right?" Jason asked.

"Yes. The power level is low which allows it to operate continuously with your world's low magic. The principles behind it though, have a level of subtle sophistication that screams of whoever designed it being diamond rank. The way it blends into the ambient magic so undetectably. Even you can't sense it, right?"

"I can't," Jason said. "What your describing reminds me of the Mirror King's aura. That had the same property of blending in with the ambient magic. I drew inspiration for my new aura control techniques from that."

"You met the Mirror King?"

"Only briefly. If the grid really was designed by someone on his level, how does that work? Dawn said that a diamond-ranker here would be a huge problem."

"My guess would be that the designer was not the same person that put the grid in place. It's more likely that a diamond-ranker designed it and someone else brought it here

and adapted it. Even that much suggests an incredibly capable expert, and they would have to be gold rank to alter the landscape like that. It would still take years, probably decades and they would need a stockpile of gold spirit coins. When the magic is as low as it is in your world, substituting higher numbers of lower-ranked coins wouldn't be enough."

"What do you think happened when they ran out?" Jason wondered. "Leave the world again? It was hundreds of years ago, but a gold-ranker can live that long, right?"

"If they're still alive, they almost have to be gone," Farrah said. "An essence user needs three coins a day in the course of normal activity. A low-ranker can get away with lower-rank coins or lots of regular food, even in this world, but not a gold-ranker. That's over a thousand gold coins a year. If they're largely inactive they could probably cut it by a third but that's still hundreds of thousands of coins if they've been here since the grid was put in place."

"You think someone brought that many coins with them?" Jason asked.

"It's not totally inconceivable but I have to imagine even a diamond-ranker would have trouble collecting that much as a lump sum. At that rank they operate on more of a barter system for valuable items and materials. Only a fraction of what Emir gets paid is in spirit coins."

"They're probably not here anymore, then," Jason said.

"More likely they either left this world or got magic-starved and died. I've heard it's a rough way to go but it almost never happens in my world. There's usually magic enough and gold-rankers don't have trouble finding work. I've only heard stories of it happening to outcasts, like people with restricted essences."

"So, what is the Network doing about the sabotage?" Jason asked.

"The problem is that for all the adaptability of the grid that prevents incidental disruption, a concerted effort can shut things off fairly easily."

"And if the nodes are as big as you say," Jason said, "There's no way to guard them."

"Exactly," Farrah said. "What's worse is that we don't even know if we're even registering all the blackouts. The Lyon branch was able to mask their suppression of the local grid for years. The International Committee is still riding herd over the French branches but a lot of their members have mysteriously vanished."

"Has Adrien Barbou resurfaced?" Jason asked.

"No, but we think either him or others from the Lyon branch are helping whoever is behind this, based on their knowledge of the grid."

"He's worked with the EOA before," Jason said. "What's the Network doing about the EOA?"

“Piling on the pressure but it’s going nowhere. The EOA claim that they’re too cellular in nature to coordinate systemic attacks on the grid.”

“But you think they’re lying.”

“There’s a growing sense that the EOA might not be as fractious and scattered as they appear. We’ve seen indications of an underlying authority guiding their actions.”

“I really hope it’s not the Builder,” Jason said, shaking his head.

“You think it could be?”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I’ve seen some of the EOA’s modified people. The process seems to be entirely different, but I’ve seen the Builder modify people as well. Maybe Dawn knows more. Have you seen her since...?”

“Since you punched her so hard she died? No. I don’t think I’d want to see us after that, either. Once I found out that she hid where I was from you, I wanted to punch her too.”

“Maybe we should try and contact her,” Jason suggested. “If proto-spaces start dumping monsters into the world, not only does the world turn into chaos but the timeline for world collapse gets accelerated. Some more direction might help us onto the right path.”

“I suspect she’ll contact us when she feels like and not before,” Farrah said. “For now, leave investigating the EOA to the Network. You and I may have the edge in a fight but we’re out of our depth when it comes to the interplay between sprawling global organisations. I’ll keep studying the grid and you focus on hitting silver as quick as you can. You’ll also need to catch up with the Network and what your family has been up to.”

“Oh?”

“Your father and your uncle have been industrious.”

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“This is incredible,” Jason said.

Although Ken and Hiro were his ostensible guides through the new family compound, it was Emi who was dragging him by the hand, pointing everything out. It was hard to believe that six months ago, this had been undeveloped bushland. Now there was what looked like a whole resort village nestled amongst the trees. The construction was all wood and tile, blending magnificently into the winding gardens and thick bushland. Given how all the plant life was thoroughly grown in, it looked like it had been in place for years.

There was a main village thoroughfare, with sprawling buildings of rustic wood. Their huge windows only seemed to reflect the gardens and never the other buildings. It added

to the feeling of being integrated with nature and Jason could sense the minor but effective magic responsible.

Making their way down the thoroughfare, Jason's guides pointed out multiple gathering halls, an administration building, a food court. Atop the food court was a restaurant, although it was as empty and unused as everything else, thus far.

"A food court and a restaurant?" Jason asked.

"Sometimes you want a communal experience and sometimes you want something fancier and intimate," Ken said.

"I see your lips moving, Dad," Jason said, "but I'm hearing Erika's voice come out."

"Of course we consulted the family chef on dining arrangements," Hiro said.

"Down there are the training facilities," Emi said, pointing out a side street off the main thoroughfare.

"There's also some magic facilities down there that Farrah said we probably won't need for a long time but are best incorporated into the core design of the compound.

"The Network office is down there, too," Emi pointed out.

"The Network office?"

"It's just Asya and Auntie Farrah," Emi explained.

"Oh, it's Auntie Farrah, now."

"She's reliable," Emi said. "She doesn't keep vanishing for months or years at a time."

"That's a little hurtful," Jason said. "Can you still call this a compound? You built an entire small town."

"Pretty much," Hiro said. "All this is just the communal facilities, branching out from the main thoroughfare."

He pointed out some of the streets leading off between the large main buildings.

"Sports facilities down that street, recreational facilities like the spa and gym down that one."

"The spa is huuuge," Emi said. "There's saunas and massage rooms and creepy old man balls bath houses."

"Emi!"

"What?" she asked. "Every time you see those bath houses in a movie it's full of saggy old men in the nude. It's gross."

"That one is Hiro's personal project," Ken said.

"I am not a saggy old man," Hiro said, and not without reason. Both Ken and Hiro had regained the healthiness of their youth after claiming essences. If they were able to rank up to bronze, the body transformation might even turn back the clock somewhat.

"The medical centre is down with the spa, too," Hiro said. "Ian is in charge of that one, although we had a lot of input from Gladys when we were putting it together."

"We've had a lot of useful input from various Network people," Hiro added. "They've got families who've been working with magic for generations, so they helped us avoid a lot of pitfalls. They tried to slip in some surveillance, too, but Farrah gave them a sharp slap on the wrist for that."

"All the buildings there behind admin are storage facilities," Ken said. "Farrah wanted to make sure we had plenty of storage for food, construction materials and magical supplies. All magically enhanced, not just warehouses and refrigerators. Once we've stocked up, we can hole up here by the hundreds for months, if need be."

"Here on the main thoroughfare we have a three-storey pub," Ken said. "It's directly connected to the cinema behind it so you can have a meal and a beer while you watch a movie."

"Once you get away from the central part of town," Hiro said, "you start getting to the residential areas. Only the main family house is here on the thoroughfare, which is that building there."

"That's a house? It's huge."

"The other residential areas have been built in clusters. There's three bushland pods, two beach pods and the clifftop pod. We ended up buying every scrap of land we could here. There were a few residences and holiday homes, but they were happy to sell at the prices we offered. We knocked them all down and worked from scratch."

"How did you afford all this?" Jason asked. "Even with my gold money on top of your original capital, this is way more than what you were talking about when I left. That's even without the magical infrastructure, which may not be visible but I can sense it. You must have forked over quite a bit to the Network for all this."

"Actually, a lot came from Craig Vermillion and his mysterious sources," Hiro said. "Farrah has been in charge of acquisitions and knows more about that side of things than I do. I do know that she traded off most of the magic coins you left behind. She didn't keep much more than a supply for those of us with essences."

"Using our abilities also saved us a lot of issues," Hiro said. "I've been pretty much doing as I'm told with the magic parts. Farrah has been teaching me but I still only understand part of what she's doing. As for the physical construction, buildings and landscape, Ken has been an absolute beast."

"The ability to move earth and facilitate plant growth is incredible," Ken said happily. "I'm like a one-man landscape and construction company with a time machine."



After taking Jason through the core section, they took him to see the residential areas. The homes there consisted of more wooden buildings that blended into the bushland, a series of small housing estates built in clusters. Each home was unique, rather than build to a template, giving each area a natural and eclectic feel.

There were beach homes in a row, fronting directly onto the sand, as well as multi-story houses surrounded by lush bushland. His favourites were the slightly more remote clifftop homes that had been dug into the rock, with balconies that emerged from the cliff face.

Farrah joined in to guide Jason through the magical aspects, replacing Ken and Hiro. Emi understood the magical elements better than her great uncle, despite only a passing instruction in array magic and accompanied Jason and Farrah.

Farrah explained the security features of the compound, with some of the design choices making more sense as they went. The nodal nature of the layout, for example, was a defensive measure. Rather than a singular area with traditional fortifications, the central area plus each of the residential hubs was an individual core of magical defences. If one of the nodes had its defences compromised, the others were able to reinstate and reinforce them.

Farrah also took him through the more secretive aspects that only Ken, Hiro, Emi and she were aware of. Neither the network nor any other members of the family knew that the clifftop excavations had been a front to establish a tunnel system. It linked the various compound nodes, as well as serving as secure service tunnels for the magical infrastructure.

Each of the subway-sized passages contained a two-way tramway combining magic and technology. The tramway was currently inactive, as were the lights. Emi was delighted as Jason used the floating motes of his star cloak to light their way as they travelled on foot.

"Seriously, how much did all this cost?" Jason asked.

"The Cabal was very interested in accessing some magical resources," Farrah said. "I brokered some three-way deals with the Cabal and the Network. You are going to have to do an awful lot of looting, now you're back, by the way."

"That's fine," Jason said. "I want to keep up the monster-hunting anyway."

"I really mean a lot," Farrah said. "I made some promises."

"It's okay. You did an amazing job with all this. I can't believe this was all done in six months."

“Don’t underestimate your uncle’s and father’s contributions,” Farrah said. “Your uncle found us a lot of very discrete construction workers who didn’t ask questions, which we needed them not to. Your father’s contacts with experts in your world’s construction and engineering fields were invaluable during the design stages. As for building it all, Ken’s talent for building with magic is every bit the equal of yours with aura control. Also, I’ve seen construction golems who don’t work as hard as him.”

The single biggest secret of the compound Farrah saved for last. Another secret tunnel, separate from the others, was a long passage that ran from the main residence out into the ocean. Like the other tunnels, it had a two-way tramway that was not yet active, leaving them to go on foot.

A few hundred metres out, the underground tunnel ascended into a glass one that ran along the seafloor. Like being at an aquarium, there were numerous seas creatures floating near the tunnel and Jason could sense the subtle magic attracting them.

“That’s a nice touch,” Jason said.

“That was my idea,” Emi said.

“It was?” Jason asked.

“It really was,” Farrah said. “I did a little neatening up of their design but that’s all. Emi and Hiro designed and implemented the fish attraction together.”

“Good job, Moppet,” Jason said to a beaming Emi.

Two kilometres out from shore, the glass tunnel ended not with any kind of sealed environment but simply stopped, terminating at a vertical sheet of water beyond which was open ocean.

“What is this?” Jason asked.

“A discrete place to put your cloud house,” Farrah said. “You can set it up right at the end of the tunnel. Air-sealing magic like this is very efficient when set up correctly. Even on your world, it can just run off the ambient magic.”

Jason walked up to the wall of water and poked it with his finger. It was rather cold.

“That’s pretty awesome,” he said. “I’ve wanted to test the cloud house out underwater since Emir told me it could work like that. I was half-tempted when I moved back to Casselton Beach.”

“Having it all the way out here will also stop your cloud house from disrupting the magic of the compound with its vortex accumulator.”

“I wanted to ask about that,” Jason said. “I could sense the magical defences and utility magic hidden throughout. Is there enough ambient magic to fuel all that?”

"No," Farrah said. "I actually used some of what I learned studying the grid to create a version of your cloud flask's vortex accumulator, except less potent and much larger. I set up several of them in empty areas and the power feeds into the compound."

"We should just be calling it a town," Jason said.

"Even with the magic we have feeding it, it still isn't enough, Farrah said. "I've made accommodations accordingly. For one thing, the town's entire magical infrastructure can operate at various levels. The town is uninhabited at the moment, so we're running at no magic. No ordinary power, either. We're still finalising the design on the magically-enhanced solar panels that will power it all. I'm working with a Network magitech expert, provided by Asya."

"Will the magic need spirit coins to run once it's all going?" Jason asked.

"At the lowest level of actual operation only specific functions will require spirit coin supplementation," Farrah explained. "I've also designed it from the onset to adapt as the magical density of the world goes up."

"So, the worse things get, the more ready we are to face them," Jason said.

"Exactly."

"What's going to get worse?" Emi asked.

"Don't worry about it, Moppet," Jason said, tussling her hair. "Uncle Jason and Auntie Farrah are going to save the world."

## Chapter 346

### New Groove

Jason, Farrah, Emi, Ken and Hiro were standing on the thoroughfare of what Jason had started thinking of as Asano Town. He was about to open a portal to Casselton Beach when Farrah's phone beeped.

"Category three incursion," she said after checking the message. "Ready to get back in the saddle?"

"Listen to you, category three," Jason said. "You've gone native."

"I've gone native? You were frying giant worm meat in a village stall on your second day in my world."

"So, how do we get to Sydney?" Jason asked. "I have the range to portal straight there, now, but I can't send a silver-ranker."

"Don't worry," Farrah said. "I have a guy."

"You can portal us, though, right?" Hiro asked. "You're our ride."

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"Wait, this is your guy?" Jason asked as he sensed the approaching aura.

"He's here?" Farrah asked. "See how fast the helicopter is? His partner bought out his half of their helicopter charter and he's been working for the Network instead. They pay better."

"He has Greg and Asya with him," Jason said. "They're making their way toward bronze, but I'm not sensing cores from them."

"You can tell that from here?" Farrah asked. "I can barely hear it and I have silver rank perception. It's quiet for a helicopter, but it's still a helicopter."

Jason gave her an odd look.

"What?" she asked.

"I was just thinking about our time together in your world. The fact that you now have a basis for comparison on helicopter noise blows my mind. You're wearing jeans."

"I like jeans. I see you finally stopped wearing the clothes you picked up on the other side."

"I kept getting into fights. There's only so much damage that basic self-repair can do and I only have a couple of suits left. Why are Greg and Asya not using cores? Do you have Greg fighting monsters?"

"He wanted to fight monsters."

"Of course he wanted to fight monsters. He's a huge nerd."

“He’s actually pretty good. Not at, you know, stabbing, but he’s got a versatile flex-support power set. It’s more about timing and judgement.”

“I have one of those on my team,” Jason said. “I wonder how she’s doing. I’m not sure I approve of Greg going out in the field, though. What about Asya?”

“The Network has been gearing up for problems ever since the grid blackouts started. They’ve been putting anyone willing to do it up for training. We have three training streams, now. One core users looking to retrain, one for people going from scratch using our methods and one for core users focused on unconventional approaches.”

“Unconventional, how?”

“Like your brother. We’re using cores to raise his abilities while his training is being adapted from military pilot training. He’s doing great as utility and air support.”

“He’s going into proto-spaces?”

“It’s fine.”

“He has kids. Little kids. What if something happens to him?”

“What if something happens to you?” Farrah countered. “You think Emi is ready to lose Uncle Jason again? And look at everything going on here.”

She gestured around at the village that had been built in his absence.

“You are the pillar on which all this rests. With time, the Asano clan will be able to stand on their own, but they aren’t there, yet.”

“We’re not a clan.”

“Tell that to the Japanese.”

“What do the Japanese have to do with it?”

“You really need to talk to Keti.”

Kaito’s helicopter swooped over the village to settle on the helipad on the roof of the main residence.

“Should there really be just this one big residence in the middle of the village?” Jason asked. “It’s a little elitist, isn’t it?”

“We’ve been calling it the Mayor’s House,” Farrah said.

“Who’s the mayor? Please don’t say Amy.”

“No, it’s Erika. She wrapped up her TV show and she’s kind of taken over family affairs.”

“Okay, that’s good,” Jason said.

The pair leapt up the several stories to the rooftop helipad, Jason with bronze-rank strength and his cloak and Farrah with raw muscle. The side of the helicopter slid open to reveal Greg and Asya inside.

"Aren't you worried about hitting the helicopter blades, jumping up like that?" Greg asked loudly over the spinning rotors.

"No," Jason yelled back. "If you're doing your mobility training properly, that should never be a danger. Farrah, have you been letting him skip out on mobility training?"

"Of course I haven't."

Jason and Farrah stepped into what seemed more like the passenger compartment of a private jet than a helicopter. Jason even focused his senses to check there wasn't any dimensional manipulation going on. The door slid shut behind them on its own, completely silencing the exterior noise. Greg and Asya were already seated, wearing the black fatigues standard for Network tactical response teams.

"You need to take that off," Farrah said to Asya, who glanced awkwardly at Jason before nodding and removing a black cloth bracelet. Jason had been able to sense the basic properties of her aura but with the bracelet's removal, Asya's emotions became plain. It was mostly nervousness.

"G'day," Jason greeted as he sat down opposite her. A smile played on the corners of his mouth.

"Hi," she said.

"Sure glad this isn't awkward," Greg said with a grin as he shifted into the seat next to Asya.

"Go away," she told him and he moved back out.

"I am never getting out of high school," he grumbled.

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Emerging from the aperture into the proto-space, Jason looked around. Craggy cliffs of dark grey stone rose up to his left and right, while the line of sky between them roiled with storm clouds and rumbled with thunder. He immediately moved deeper into the gorge as more people streamed from the aperture. The bottom of the gorge was a trickling stream running over loose rocks.

- 
- You have entered an unstable physical reality. Your presence will decrease the rate at which it will destabilise.
- 

"Not a great spot for base camp," Jason observed. His cloak appeared around him and he jumped straight up. Shadow arms extended from his cloak to either side and he used them to grab the rock walls to fling himself higher. In the last six months, he had used them more and more independently of his real arms.

During his time away, Jason had done more than simply advance his abilities. Just as he had worked on his aura control, his proficiency with his other powers had improved. This wasn't just advancing his essence abilities but enhancing his skill in wielding them.

Shooting over the top of the gorge, he looked out over the landscape as he slowly drifted down to one side. It was a blasted land of dark soil and bare stone, with only a few blackened trees dotting the landscape. From what he could see, the gorge he was standing atop was part of a greater spiderweb of crevasses and gullies.

Farrah flew out of the gorge on fiery wings, flanked by a handful of Network scouts who shot away immediately. Farrah's flame wings were not great for flying, lacking strength, control and speed. She generally avoided flying with them once she armoured up, as they were barely able to lift her. The wings had other virtues, however, and Jason's power had given them a solid indication of who was responsible.

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#### Ability: [Wings of the World-Phoenix]

- Transfigured from [Outworlder] ability [Wings of Fire].
- Conjure fiery wings that allow flight. While wings are active, add disruptive-force damage to all fire and heat damage inflicted. This effect consumes mana.
- The wings can be detonated to inflict fire and disruptive force damage on nearby enemies while subjecting self and allies to a powerful healing effect and a cleanse that affects magic and poison. The strength of the healing effect on yourself is significantly higher than on allies and highly effective on catastrophic damage and wounding effects.
- Subsequent conjurations of the wings will have diminished bonus, slowly recovering strength over 24 hours. Wings cannot be detonated again until ability strength is fully recovered.

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The wings made Farrah's flames much more effective against incorporeal creatures and magical defences, although it further added to her mana-consumption issues.

"There's a lot of silver-rank monsters in this space," Jason said. "Are we sure this is a silver-rank space?"

"It is," a silver-ranker said, rising out of the gorge on a gust of wind. It was Koen Waters, the Sydney branch's Director of Tactical Operations. "Non ADE cat-threes started appearing in category three incursion spaces before you two came along. It's been escalating over the last year, though, especially while you were off playing David Carradine."

“Who?” Farrah asked. “I’ve been here a year and I still have no idea who you people are talking about.”

“You haven’t seen Kung Fu?” Koen asked.

“Is that another old TV show?” Farrah asked. “What is wrong with you people? Jason’s sister made me watch some Airwolf and it was terrible.”

“What makes you think there are a lot of cat-threes?” Koen asked Jason.

“I can sense them. And your people down in the gorge. You’re earth-shaping space for a base camp?”

“We’ll set up on top as well,” Koen said. “It’ll be a little bit before we secure the space and get to sweeping, but you being here means we don’t have to rush. The extra time you extend incursion space stability, plus the looting, makes it worth having you here even if you spend the whole time in a lounge chair.”

“I think I’ll skip the chair and go clean up some of those silvers,” Jason said and dashed away.

Koen sighed as he watched Jason zip over the ground at a fleeting pace.

“I see he didn’t work on his collaborative skills while he was away. Can he really sense monsters from here?”

“Did you just sigh?” Farrah asked.

“Er... no.”

“Are you still breathing?” Farrah asked. “You shouldn’t still need to breathe at silver rank. Have you not been doing those exercises I taught you?”

“I’m going to check on how the camp setup is going,” Koen said, gesturing with his thumb and then jumping back into the gorge.

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Jason could have used Shade for transport but decided to set out on foot. During his time away he had worked on his ability use, but not everything was new. Back in the Mistrun Delta, Jason had developed a running technique that used his cloak to increase speed, conserve energy and navigate terrain. With his speed attribute at the top end of bronze, he revisited that technique with the enhanced agility, reflexes and straight-line speed that entailed.

The result was that he moved across the rough ground of the proto-space like a ghost, all but skimming through the air. The hopping, slightly uneven gait of the past was now smooth like a hovercraft on a cushion of air.

Approaching the first silver-rank monster, he sensed a gaggle of smaller, weaker iron-rank monsters around it, along with a few bronzes. The main monster turned out to be a



giant black lizard with silver-white glowing eyes, while the supplemental creatures were elementals. Wind and lightning elementals danced on the air like dandelion petals, while earth elementals swarmed around the creature's feet.

“Gordon,” Jason said, not slowing down and the familiar appeared next to him. Gordon’s ordinary floating speed could not match Jason’s so he kept pace by chaining his dash ability.

The monsters sensed their approach as soon as Gordon appeared, the elementals stirring into a frenzy. They rushed forward and Gordon gave up dashing as they entered his considerable range. Four bright beams of energy, two orange and two blue, swept through the iron-rank monsters with annihilative force.

The blue beams of disruptive-force were doom for the amorphous wind and lightning elementals, disposing of them with a crackle like insects hit with a bug zapper. The orange resonating-force beams dug into the earth elementals like they were drilling for oil. The few bronze-rank elementals lasted a little longer, but Gordon was at the high-end of bronze and the perfect weapon against such creatures.

Jason ignored the elementals, moving directly on the lizard that was the size of a school bus. Jason sensed the magic precursor of an attack and juked sideways, not slowing as lightning erupted from the lizard’s eyes and flashed past him. He arrived in front of the lizard as he conjured a dagger into his hand.

“Shade.”

Several of Shade’s bodies surrounded the creature. In the past, Jason would have used them to stage hit-and-run strikes, landing a couple of special attacks and then backing off to cast spells before moving on and letting his affliction suite do its work.

This was not what Jason did to the lizard. His dagger flashed out to make sewing-machine strikes; quick, shallow, in an unceasing staccato. Hit after hit, each one delivering the afflictions of a special attack plus the afflictions of the dagger. Instead of pre-emptively dodging with shadow jumps, he relied on his skill to avoid the lizard as he kept making attacks.

The oversized lizard thrashed with limbs and tried to bite at him but Jason used its size against it, staying tucked in close, his dagger never stopping. It repositioned to get a better angle on Jason and only then did he shadow jump to one of Shade’s bodies, the needlework of his dagger barely pausing.

Although Jason had seized the initiative, the lizard still posed a threat to Jason. It did not have the reflexes of a silver-rank essence user but was still devilishly quick for its size and its strength would have given even Farrah pause. When it caught Jason with a tail

lash, it shattered the accumulated shields from his amulet and hammered his torso like a speeding car.

He was sent careening through the air before the lightness of his cloak let him drift to a floating stop. The healing from Colin and the converted amulet shields went to work as Jason floated in the air where he'd been slapped. He extended his hand toward the monster.

*"Your blood is not yours to keep but mine on which to feast."*

Life force drained out of the lizard and into Jason. The lizard retaliated by opening its mouth and spitting out ball lightning that floated toward Jason, who was exposed as he drifted in the air. Jason used his cloak as a shadow to jump through, right before the ball lightning exploded in the space he had just occupied. He emerging from one of Shade's bodies as a new cloak manifested around him, immediately resuming his attacks.

The rapid-fire strikes from his dagger represented a fundamental change in Jason's approach to combat. He had long ago given up on rapid kills as impossible due to his lack of immediate damage attacks, consigning himself to the slow and steady path to victory. As he took the time to reassess his abilities, had reassessed that presumption as well and developed a new combat dynamic.

From the very beginning, Inexorable Doom had been Jason's signature ability, with only his familiars being more iconic. It had been critical to his combat style, allowing him to back off as it piled on more of every affliction he levied. He used it on the lizard, along with other affliction spells, chanting the incantations even as he dodged limbs and the lizard's bite while dishing out more attacks. This time, however, it was merely an addendum.

Jason didn't care if his sewing machine attacks were weak, so long as they riddled the lizard with afflictions. Faster than Inexorable Doom could match, the monster was staggering already as a tide of necrosis washed over it. Jason leapt lightly up and then kicked off the lizard with both feet, sailing back thanks to the lightness from his cloak and cast another spell.

*"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."*

Punition dealt damage based on afflictions in place, which devastated the lizard, leaving it a stumbling wreck. Even so, silver-rank fortitude persisted. Sensing its demise, the lizard made a final play. Around a third of the elementals were yet to be swatted by Gordon and they suddenly drew closer to the lizard, like dinghies caught in a whirlpool. They struggled to escape but the force pulling them in didn't allow it and they were absorbed into the lizard's body.

Jason sensed the power building inside the monster and returned to his normal weight, dropping agilely to the ground and opening the portal arch to his spirit vault. He ducked inside, Gordon and Shade's bodies following quick behind. From inside his spirit vault, Jason sensed the destruction of the archway. The darkness inside the matching arch inside the vault vanished, leaving the archway empty.

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➤ [You have defeated \[Lesser Stormchar Lizard\].](#)

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Jason used his portal ability, Path of Shadows on the empty arch. On the battlefield Jason had just left, an archway rose up from the floor of a newly-formed crater. Jason stepped out and looked around. Extending his senses he found a scrap of blackened flesh and brushed his fingers over it.

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➤ [Would you like to loot \[Lesser Stormchar Lizard\]?](#)

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Striding out of the crater, Jason turned his eyes to the sky, looking at the distant drone Koen had sent to follow him. Behind him, rainbow smoke rose up from points around the crater like streamers, from every place an exploded piece of monster had scattered. Then he skimmed off over the ground in the direction of the next silver-rank monster.

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At the base camp. Koen was rewinding the footage from the drone.

"What are you looking for?" Nigel asked him.

"The timestamp," Koen said, pausing the footage. "We just watched a solo category two wipe out a swarm of elementals and a cat-three the size of a train car in forty three-seconds."

## Chapter 347

### Get to the Chopper

Kaito had been supplied with a variety of awakening stones loaded towards producing useful complements to his main power. Koen Waters had seen potential in Kaito's abilities and had the Network recruit him and provide the stones to complete his power set. They started with common stones, like awakening stones of the gun and various elemental stones. Less common were the awakening stones of vision and reach.

The result was a comprehensive suite of abilities that turned Kaito and his helicopter into a high-utility asset for the Network. His helicopter was not well-suited to confronting powerful monsters but was highly effective at escaping pursuit and handling the kinds of weaker enemies that appeared in greater numbers than their more powerful counterparts.

The true value of Kaito's contribution was twofold, with neither factor being the hunting of monsters. One was that he could swiftly and safely deploy tactical units or supplies throughout an incursion space, while the other was the improvement it brought to the command and control capabilities of the incursion response team.

Kaito's vehicle was sized in between a military transport helicopter and a large commercial helicopter while being faster and more agile than both. He was able to modify the helicopter literally on the fly, reconfiguring the interior to meet his needs moment to moment. From luxuriously-spaced passenger transport to efficient troop seating to cargo space, complete with loading platform, the helicopter could perform whatever role was asked of it.

What really excited the Director of Tactical Operations was the helicopter's value as a mobile command relay. The helicopter had a communication system that was as useful, if not more so, than Jason's party interface. It was able to augment ordinary comms technology to operate reliably in magically saturated areas. It could also serve as a sensor platform, courtesy of Kaito's powers. His abilities were able to collect and relay video feed and sensor data from the helicopter itself, as well as remote auxiliary units.

Those auxiliary units were the two semi-autonomous drone variants Kaito could produce with abilities from his vehicle essence. One type was a trio of small attack units, mounted with infantry-grade guns. The more useful consisted of a half-dozen observation drones that had no weapons but could travel extended ranges at high speed. They carried high-grade video and audio systems, along with the sensor capacity to track magic and auras.

Kaito's observation drones were an improvement over the two varieties the Network used. The non-magical ones they employed had significant reliability issues in magical zones. The magical ones were much better but were fuelled by spirit coins, a limited and costly resource. Kaito's drones used his mana and could reliably transmit video, audio and sensor data to the helicopter, the base camp or both.

The sensor suites available to the drones and the helicopter itself came courtesy of Kaito's perception power that was akin to something many summoning specialists gained access to. Rather than enhance his own senses, at least at iron-rank, it bestowed the perception power on something else. Instead of a summon, as was typical, the subject was the sensors of his helicopter, providing magic and aura senses that outstripped a normal iron-ranker. More mundane sensor systems came as part of the helicopter conjuration power, although those systems were magically enhanced.

Drone control and secondary system management were all controlled from the cockpit. Rather than a physical dashboard of displays and screens, there was only a sleek and minimalist dashboard of controls. All systems were monitored through augmented reality glasses that could provide or eliminate any and all displays as needed, from drone feeds to helicopter systems.

Control of the secondary systems could be carried out by the pilot, but they were most effective when managed by a co-pilot, for which reason the network had supplied the helicopter with a crew. Kaito's three-person crew ended up being Asya and Greg, who had both known Kaito for years, along with a category three whose job was to step in when something big and nasty appeared.

Greg took the co-pilot slot. Kaito had been teaching him how to fly a helicopter but his true role was to manage the drones, sensors and comms. He had been chosen both for his existing connection to Kaito and what turned out to be a prodigious talent for multitasking.

Asya was combat support. She was somewhat superfluous, with the category three on board, but in addition to being groomed for higher rank, her power set gave her a useful niche. With her gun, gathering and adept essences forming the master confluence, she was rapidly becoming an expert sniper and general support gunner.

She had actually finalised her own repertoire of abilities with this role in mind, completing her power set only after being assigned to the helicopter. She had chosen some awakening stones specifically to add some heavier weapon options to her original, precision sniper approach.

The silver-ranker wasn't a ranged attacker like Asya. Ruth didn't look like a Russian bodybuilder so much as like she'd eaten a Russian bodybuilder and wanted to fist-fight an army transport to work off the carbs. It would have been a one-sided victory, given the silver-ranker's abilities. Her might, swift, and hand essences combined to form the onslaught confluence, making her a powerhouse of speed and strength with battering ram fists. She excelled in intercepting and putting down dangerous attackers, which was exactly her role on the helicopter's crew.

Despite having arms the thickness of Greg's head, Ruth was incongruously sweet and friendly, with unassailable confidence that her lower-rank companions found reassuring.

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Kaito's helicopter moved high over the ground in the proto space, with a section of Network troops in the back. An occasional wind or lightning elemental would approach, at which point Kaito's supplemental abilities came into play. An expensive awakening stone of dimension had given Kaito a retractable gun for his helicopter that fired rapid streams of disruptive-force ammunition, which was effective at dissuading even the bronze-rank elemental variants from approaching. It wasn't enough to kill them but it convinced them to veer off in search of weaker prey.

"I've got a category two flier, coming in fast at 10 o'clock," Kaito said as a signal appeared on the cockpit sensors. The current cockpit configuration had four seats for the crew, with a bare-bones troop transport set up in the main compartment.

"Fast or tough?" Ruth asked.

"Fast," Kaito said. "You're up, Asya."

A small panel next to Asya opened up, letting in a rush of air. Asya conjured a sniper rifle and slid the barrel out through the panel, eyeing down the sight.

"Altering trajectory to give you a shot," Kaito said and soon after, a black lizard with huge wings fell into Asya's sights.

Asya had an ability to ignore rank disparity that was more like Farrah's than Jason's in that it was an essence ability, rather than an evolved racial gift. Even so, getting a one-shot kill on a bronze-rank monster was unlikely given the toughness of monsters.

Asya still could have gone for the kill, her power set allowing her to gather and condense ambient magic for a single, potent shot. If she could land the headshot, it should be enough to drop the creature, given that flying monsters weren't usually as tough as their land-bound counterparts.

Instead of risking a high-impact shot on the monsters relatively small head, she aimed for the broad wings. She used a special attack that erupted in a proximity burst, only needing to get close. The power didn't match a direct hit but it tagged one of the creature's wings, not crippling it but causing it to drop away, rapidly losing altitude.

"Nice," Kaito said, then noticed Greg staring into space.

"What is it?" Kaito asked.

"I just watched Jason through one of the drones," he said. "I'd only seen him fight in some patchy drone footage from before he left. It doesn't seem like him, all black-clad and ominous."

"That's exactly like him," Kaito said. "Such a melodramatist."

"I'd like to see that footage," Ruth said. "Can you send it to me?"

"Sure," Greg said.

Ruth put on the augmented reality goggles hanging on the back of Greg's seat in front of her.

"Cancel that," Kaito said. "We're coming up on the drop point."

Greg radioed the section of troops in the rear, telling them to prepare for deployment. Kaito dropped the helicopter to two-hundred metres and brought it into a hover. Normally he would go lower but there were a lot of flying monsters in this particular proto-space.

In the rear compartment, the side of the helicopter slid open as a panel on the floor slid away to reveal what looked like a small wind turbine pointing up. It started blasting air, which oddly collected in front of the open side panel, shimmering in place.

"Go!" the section leader called out and the first trooper dashed through the shimmering air and out of the helicopter, falling away. Some of the shimmering air attached itself to him as he passed through it. The whole section jumped out, one by one, plunging toward the ground.

Right before they landed, the shimmering air around them tightened into a cushion, depositing them softly onto the ground before dissipating in a rush of wind. Back on the helicopter, the side door closed itself and Kaito set course for the next objective.

"I have to say," Jason said from the rear of the cockpit, "I'm kind of annoyed at how well this worked out."

The helicopter crew all turned to look at him in surprise.

"I was going to give you the rat, snake and skunk essences," Jason continued. "I wish I had, now, to be honest."

"How did you get in here?" Kaito asked.

"I've got magic powers. How do you not know that at this point?"

"I have security abilities," Kaito said. "Sensor abilities."

Ruth chuckled, sharing an amused look with Jason.

"The tyranny of rank, little brother."

"You're the little brother," Kaito said.

"That may be true out in the world, Kai," Jason said, "but not here. This is my kingdom."

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Jason and Asya were walking along the Castle Heads shorefront. Grass led down to white sand on one side of the street, while the other had cafés and storefronts. Asya and Jason were heading for the ice cream shop.

"This is my kingdom." Asya quoted. "Really?"

"A bit much?" Jason asked.

"A bit? That was cringeworthy. Not as sad as Greg constantly telling people to 'get to the chopper' in a sketchy accent, but not good."

"I thought it was cool," Jason said.

"It was not. It was also rather mean."

"Kaito deserves it."

"That's a boy's complaint. It's time for you to be a man."

"Ouch. Greg thought it was cool."

Asya gave him a flat look.

"I'm torpedoing my own point here, aren't I."

"Greg is great," Asya said. "But he's also a little bit twelve years old. The man wears Ninja Turtle shirts to briefings."

"To briefings about fighting monsters from another dimension using magic powers. Ninja Turtle shirts should be the uniform."

"I don't think Ketevan is going to like dealing with the both of you at once," she said with a laugh.

"What's going on with Greg's abilities, though?" Jason asked. "Wasn't that combination meant to give him the magitech confluence?"

"It did."

"Every magitech guy I've seen in the Network is all about high-tech gadgets and stuff. They're half James Bond and half Iron Man. How did Greg end up all steampunk Tesla?"

"You don't like his electrified nail turret?"

"No, it's awesome, I'm just saying."



"You know, we still need to talk about Network business. That is technically what we're meeting about."

"Are you sure I can't tell you another heroic story about my trip away?"

"Alright," Asya said with an accommodation Jason immediately found suspect. "Did you happen to run into Li Li Mei while you were passing through China?"

"Who?" Jason asked innocently. "Oh, the Network rep who came here that one time. I don't recall her being super-pretty at all."

"Is that right?"

"So," Jason said. "Time to dig into that Network business you say?"

"No," Asya said, pointing at the shop they were now standing in front of. "It's time for ice cream."

"Right, yes," Jason said, pushing open the door.

"How long were you in China for?" Asya asked as they went inside.

"You know, I might just go vanilla. People look down on it as a plain flavour, but a proper vanilla can be really delicious..."

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On the roof deck of the houseboat, Asya and Jason were sitting next to one another at a table. Asya was taking him through the important things he had missed during his time away.

"...escalating rate of manifestation, which you've already seen for yourself. The new training programs are starting to pay off but it's going to take time in areas outside of Australia. The new training protocols we've developed with input from Farrah are showing their effects here, but the international partners now have to go back and work with their own people. Even then, we're talking about training programs that have been developed and implemented in a critically short time. The largest deficit is experience."

"There's only one solution to a lack of experience," Jason said, "and that's to go out and get it."

"We're projecting significant problems. In the short term, we're anticipating a sharp increase in casualties."

"That's realistic," Jason said. "The Network is never going to fight the way they do in the other world and they'd be foolish to try. They need to learn from what Farrah can teach them but find a way to use it that works for them. All Farrah was really trying to impart were principles, as well as things like improved meditation methodology. She can't turn the whole Network into adventurers in six months."

"No, it's on us, now. You know, the original idea was for you to do the teaching."

"You're better off, believe me. It's a matter of temperament."

"Oh, I believe you."

"Hey..."

"The last thing we need to discuss is the image you built up during your time away."

"I was trying to avoid building an image."

Asya opened a video depicting a man in starlight cloak fighting people in a Vietnamese slum.

"For the most part," Jason added. "If the Network doesn't want me showing off, you should stop trying to kidnap me."

"We came down on the Hanoi branch the same way we did Lyon. Disturbingly, we got the exact same result, once we started digging."

"Meaning what?"

"Adrien Barbou."

"You're kidding. I thought he hadn't resurfaced."

"We're keeping it quiet, for now. We believe he's working with the EOA, feeding them information from his old Network contacts. We're currently attempting to infiltrate those contacts to get something concrete we can slap the EOA with. We can't just accuse them of orchestrating the blackouts and go after them with no evidence because the Cabal won't stand for it. The Network is the strongest of the world's magical triad but we aren't stronger than the other two put together. If we start acting unilaterally against the EOA, the Cabal will side with them out of fear we'll go after them next."

"Why are you even telling me?"

"Our analysts think that Barbou has taken it upon himself to become your publicist."

"What?" Jason asked.

"We constantly monitor media for potential breaches," Asya explained. "When you went more overt after Hanoi we paid additional attention to any media attention related to your activities. We realised that someone was putting the pieces together and quietly dropping breadcrumbs for others to find."

"Why?"

"We don't know. We stumbled into the idea that Barbou might be the man behind the curtain because we've been looking into his old contacts. As for his motivations, the best we've come up with is that a magic man secretly running around the world doing good deeds fits the EOA agenda of bringing magic into the light. They might have seen us not clamping down on you and tried to run with it."

"He's making me look good?"

"That's arguable. We're seeing a lot of fringe chatter around the Starlight Angel/Starlight Rider persona, but conspiracy types don't tend to look at things in a positive light."

"I was healing the sick."

"But did you make them sick, as an excuse to implant tracking devices? Were you testing a bioweapon for use when your people start the invasion?"

"They think I'm an alien?"

"You are an alien."

"I am now, but they don't know that. I'm from the Mid North Coast, not the mid-north of Andromeda."

"You really don't know anything about astronomy, do you?"

"Because I'm not an alien!"

## Chapter 348

### What's Left of Your Principles

“Chloe, it’s good to hear from you,” Jason said as the video chat opened. “How’ve you been?”

“I’ve been staying with my sister,” she said. “It’s been nice but I am increasingly ready to go.”

Jason chuckled.

“As a guy who ran away from his family for six months, I completely understand.”

“Well, whatever your reasons, the entirety of West Africa benefited, even if they don’t know it. Which is actually why I called you?”

“The outbreak is flaring back up?”

“No, it’s about you. I’ve been talking to my colleagues and a lot of them have been contacted by an investigative journalist.”

“I didn’t think they had those anymore. Isn’t it all just ideologues and regurgitated press releases now?”

“It depends on who is willing to pay, and someone is putting up for some airline miles on this one. The people I’ve talked to haven’t been talking, but sooner or later, someone is going to.”

“I’m aware of someone pushing me into the spotlight from the shadows,” Jason said ominously. “He’s an enemy I picked up along the way.”

“I have to think that someone like you has a different kind of enemy to someone like me,” Chloe said. “My biggest enemy beat me out for the good parking space at the hospital where I used to work.”

“My enemy held my friend prisoner and... let’s just say yes, different kinds of enemy.”

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The meeting room of the Four Cardinals of the EOA seemed cavernous, with high ceilings and wide walls while being almost entirely empty. There was a large monitor on one wall, a square table in the middle that seemed diminutive given the scope of the room and an exterior wall, made entirely of glass.

Mr North and the new Mr East stood in front of the wall, taking in the panoramic view of Los Angeles as they awaited their final two companions.

“You realise,” Mr North said, “that if we tie you or Mrs West to the demise of your predecessor, the consequences will have a resounding finality.”

“I do,” Adrien Barbou said.

"Then let me compliment you on your thoroughness, Mr East. My investigators rarely find themselves at such a loss."

"I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about, Mr North."

Mr North gave a saturnine smile.

"I do so hope there won't be any problems stemming from a leadership change at this critical time, Mr East."

"I think you will find, Mr North, that a change was exactly what was required. I called this meeting for a reason."

"I'm positively dripping with anticipation."

Mr North did not probe further, awaiting the remaining members of their collective. He had long ago schooled himself out of dangerous curiosity and exploitable impatience. When Mrs West and Mrs South arrived together, the four took their places around the square table. Their subordinates were not present at this meeting and the four were alone in the large room.

"The meeting is yours, Mr East," Mr North said. "The agenda is yours to set."

"In the process of auditing the activities of my predecessor," Barbou said, "I have come across a number of unfortunate irregularities."

"Oh?" Mrs South prompted. "What manner of irregularities?"

"It would appear," Barbou said, "that the previous Mr East had rather drastically overstated the problems in enacting the final stage of our plan. It seems that he was stalling the process to give certain factions within the Cabal time to prepare."

"What factions are those?" Mr North asked.

"Unknown. I have only just made these revelations and immediately moved to lock down all of the previous Mr East's subordinates for investigation and table this meeting. I felt it prudent to discuss these issues before launching an internal investigation and enacting inquiries into the Cabal."

"A choice wisely made," Mrs West said.

"You have evidence of these improprieties on the part of your predecessor?" Mrs South asked.

"I do," Barbou said. "As the materials are sensitive, rather than digital transmission I am having the full details hand-delivered to each of you on secure drives."

"Prudent," Mr North said. "If Mr East truly was stalling, then do you have a revised time frame in which we can enact the next stage?"

"We could begin immediately," Barbou said. "I would recommend, however, that we wait two weeks. This will give me time to root out any more surprises the previous Mr East

left behind and vet his people. It would also allow me to bring my project from before ascending to my new role to fruition."

"You're ready to move forward with that?" Mrs West asked.

"Yes, although I won't make the final move without consensus. This will go further than the Network is willing to tolerate."

"And will prime the world for our next move with a conversation of what is and is not possible," Mrs West said.

"There is another problem the late Mr East was either hiding or unaware of," Barbou said. "One that potentially means cancelling everything."

Eyebrows raised all around the table.

"Go on," Mr North said.

"I've been personally re-examining every aspect of the grid blackout program, now that I have control of it. Mr East's grasp of the magical mechanics involved was not as comprehensive as either we would like or he portrayed. In addition to the fact that we are ready to go, he failed to grasp the full ramifications of dropping the grid in its entirety."

"Which are?"

"My predecessor indicated that it would take the grid between one and two weeks to reactivate following a total shutdown. Enough time for dimension incursion spaces to deliver monsters across the world and definitively proving the existence of magic. We already know that the results of this will be damaging. The reality is that the grid will be down for months. At least two, most likely three or four. It could be longer, or even permanent. That's a low but real probability. This is all assuming that the Network fails to find a way to repair the damage and return the grid to functionality, which would alter our timelines, obviously."

"Months," Mrs South said. "That wouldn't be damage. Months of monster hordes being spewed into the world would be an apocalypse."

"That's a little dramatic," Mrs West said.

"No," Barbou disagreed. "Mrs South is right. I've seen the dimensional spaces, the armies of monsters. Months without the grid to intercept them will change civilisation forever. It could potentially end it."

"Assuming that the Network can't get the grid active again," Mrs West said.

"How likely is that?" Mr North asked.

"A year ago, I would have considered it highly likely," Barbou said. "The outworlders have changed that. My contacts tell me that the outworlder once in my custody has been advancing the Network's comprehension of the grid in leaps and bounds."

“Farrah Hurin,” Mrs West said.

“It doesn’t matter what her name is,” Barbou said. “Only what impact she has on our plans.”

The other three looked to Mr North, the first among equals. They waited as he sat in thoughtful silence, tapping a finger against his lips. Then the finger stopped.

“One week,” Mr North said. “If we can move now, then we go at the earliest reasonable opportunity. Is that sufficient to root out any further problems regarding your predecessor, Mr East?”

“If you are willing to loan me some of your excellent investigators, Mr North. I am still building my own cadre of reliable people.”

“Done,” Mr North said. “Mrs South, please coordinate with Mr East and take charge of looking into the Cabal’s activities.”

“Are we truly going to gloss over this?” Mrs South asked. “Our goal was to forge a place in a world turned to magic, not to burn that world down.”

“A wide-scale collapse of civic and social infrastructure does not obviate our objectives,” Mr North said.

“You would leave us ruling over a pile of ash?” Mrs South asked.

“So long as we rule,” Mr North said. “The complete collapse of the systems on which the Cabal and the Network have built their power bases will, at the last, bring us to parity. As the world rebuilds, we will finally stand as one of the tallest pillars.”

Mrs South took a long, slow breath, then stood up.

“We are not the people we set out to become,” she said. “In the beginning, our goal was to democratise magic. To take it from those who were hoarding it for themselves. Somewhere along the way, instead of defeating them, we became them. I have no illusions that I am good and I can live with that. I gave up on pulling down the tower for the chance to live on top of it, looking down at others like ants. But there is a difference between looking down on ants and using a glass to burn them. I may have given up on making the world better but I won’t be party to burning it down.”

In the wake of her tirade, the other three shared a look, then turned their gazes back to Mrs South.

“Are you certain?” Mr North asked. “You understand the consequences of standing on what’s left of your principles. You won’t affect change. You won’t make anything better for anyone but whoever we find to fill your seat. Someone who we will make sure does not share your compunctions. Only if you participate do you have any chance of steering

events in the direction you want them to go. You can't stop it, but perhaps you can ameliorate it. Only by standing with us will you have the chance."

"Mrs South," Mrs West said, her face filled with reluctance. "Audrey. If you go against us, you change nothing. You won't leave this room and you know that. I understand that staying the course might feel like a stain but do you want to die clean or actually make some kind of difference?"

Mrs South turned around, placing her back to the table.

"I'll die clean."

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"...amateur footage of a figure that looks to be wrapped in an eerie garb made from the night itself. It doesn't move like a human and what it does to the people in this video is not something a human can do. Perhaps not even something any human would, given the horrific results. The Vietnamese government denies this incident took place, claiming the video is a hoax, but we have found what we believe to be the site of this altercation and spoke to local residents. As you're about to see, these people believe the impossible is not as impossible as most of us believe..."

Anna sighed, pausing the footage. She was in her office with Asya and Michael Aram, who was temporarily serving as Anna's assistant. Her normal assistant was not cleared for the information anticipated to pass over Anna's desk in the near future.

"How much traction is it getting?" Anna asked.

"It's getting a lot of promotion amongst susceptible demographics," Aram said. "The mainstreaming of conspiracy rhetoric in the US is helping this along, and with their cultural influence, it's spreading far and digging deep. Most outlets are dismissing it but they're all playing it because it's content that gets people talking. The footage from the rolling gunfight here in Sydney is getting more play than ever."

"How bad is this?" Anna asked Asya.

"The International Committee is throwing a fit," Asya said. "Not the local one in Canberra but Brussels, Berlin, Shanghai, New York, Johannesburg, Cairo..."

Asya shook her head in resignation.

"There's an emergency video conclave going on as we speak," she said. "It was decided that there wasn't time to convene in person. I'm not privy to what they're discussing, but the preliminary directions they're issuing speak volumes."

"Which are?" Anna asked.

"All branches are being instructed to prepare to enact breach protocols."

"This is it, then?" Aram asked. "The IC is ready to bite the bullet and go public?"



“The consensus is that the Engineers of Ascension will do it if we don’t. Expect direction soon, and in the meantime, get ready to start working with local government officials. Those channels are going to be critical, now.”

“I think I always knew,” Anna said, looking at the frozen image of a cloaked Jason on the screen. “From the moment that lunatic popped up, he was always going to be the one to bring it all down.”

“I don’t think that’s fair,” Asya said.

“Of course you don’t,” Anna said. “It’s hardly a secret that you’re looking to be the coulis on his panna cotta.”

Asya’s body language closed off.

“I’ll thank you to show some professionalism, Committeewoman Tilden. If I have any further directives from the International Committee, I’ll see you receive them.”

Anna winced as Asya stiffly left the office.

“Stress,” Anna said, pinching the bridge of her nose, “is not improving my work performance. Aram, sort out a car. I’m going to be spending a lot of the upcoming time in the office, so I’m going to see my wife while I still can.”

“Of course.”

Aram left, but shortly thereafter came running back, his feet pounding the tiled corridor.

“I take it this isn’t about the car,” Anna said.

“The grid went down,” Aram said, his face flushed.

“A blackout here in Sydney?”

Blackouts in major cities were always the most dangerous.

“Not a blackout,” Aram said. “The grid went down. The whole grid. Everywhere.”

## Chapter 349

### Contingencies

"I'm sure Uncle Jason will be here soon," Erika said to her sullen daughter.

"I don't see what the big deal is," Emi's friend Ruby said. "You're always talking about your uncle but he's never around."

The beach birthday party was going well, although the ongoing absence of her uncle was increasingly ruining the birthday girl's mood.

"Mrs Asano, Miss Emi," Shade said. "Mr Asano is on his way."

"Who said that?" Ruby asked, looking around. "Is there a British man hidden somewhere? Is it a birthday surprise, because that would be weird."

"Shade," Erika hissed. "What are you doing?"

"The time for secrecy is over, Mrs Asano," Shade said. "Mr Asano is coming to bring your family to the compound. Prepare them to go."

"What are you talking about?"

She looked up, hearing a commotion, her eyes following the startled gazes and pointed hands to the street that ran along the beachfront. A huge black motorcycle hurtled along at a pace definitely outside the speed limit, a cloak of stars trailing behind like a comet's tail.

The bike swerved off the road, over the grass and off the grassy embankment. Instead of dropping down to the sand, the bike erupted into a cloud of darkness. The rider glided through the air, his cloak swept out like wings of night, absorbing the cloud of shadows. The rider landed in front of Emi, the cloak draping around him. In the middle of the sunny day, surrounded by colourfully-clad children, it looked deeply incongruous.

"Sorry I'm late," Jason said. He ignored the crowd of people pulling out their phones to record.

"What are you doing?" Erika asked as her husband rushed up to join them. Ruby's parent likewise rushed over the sand, protectively standing in front of their daughter.

"Questions can wait," Jason said. "Right now, we go."

Erika opened her mouth to ask a question, processed what Jason had said and then paused.

"Alright," she said, nodding.

"What is going on?" Ruby's father asked. "You're that thing from the news. The one that kills people!"

A pair of silver eyes, shrouded in darkness turned on him and he felt a weight pressing down on his soul.

“Then you should probably watch your tone,” Jason said in the voice he normally saved for people about to die.

“Uncle Jason, that’s my friend’s Dad!”

He looked down at his niece, then pushed the hood back off his head.

“Sorry,” he said. “Happy birthday, Moppet, but we have to go. We’re all moving to the compound. Today.”

He opened a portal arch, which drew an audible reaction from the crowd.

“I need to round up the rest of the family,” Jason said. “I’ll explain later, but things are about to get very, very bad.”

Emi pushed past Ruby’s parents to grab her friend by the arms.

“They have to come too,” she insisted.

Jason looked at the fierce determination on the face of his niece and grinned.

“I have to get the rest of the family, so the portal closes in one minute,” he said. “You have until then to convince them to step through.”

“I am not letting my daughter step into whatever the hell this is!”

More of the Asano family were rushing up as Ian tried to calm down Ruby’s father and Erika spoke to her mother. Some of the Asano family knew what was going on, while others did not and were startled to see Jason clad in magical darkness.

“Son, what’s going on?” Ken asked as he ran onto the sand. Jason had rushed right past him earlier, up on the grassy embankment that bordered the beach. He had been with Hiro, who was following close behind his brother. Behind him was Taika, who had made an executive decision after seeing Jason in full regalia, as well as the portal he opened.

“I’ve got the cake!” he yelled out carrying the box containing the birthday cake Erika had made. He took it straight through the portal without bothering to wait for anyone else.

Jason turned to Ken and Hiro.

“Help me get the ones who don’t know about everything through the portal,” he said. He was struck by the family resemblance as the brothers both nodded and got to work, turning to the still-gathering family members.

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Every Network facility on the planet was a frenzy of activity, and they were not alone. All around the world, military units that had worked with the Network were scrambling to expand their readiness for what was to come. Government bodies globally were enacting protocols developed with the Network, attempting to set logistics into place, rapidly

introduce emergency legislation and accelerate a program of public awareness that the world was about to face an unprecedented threat.

The public awareness component was the first to face a crucial impediment. As governments tried to broadcast public service announcements, media companies resisted, unleashing a barrage of legal challenges.

Those challenges didn't completely shut down the flow of information but it was inflicting critical gaps in the knowledge that was going out to the public. With genuine information patchy and inconsistent, those gaps were being filled with speculation, conspiracy theories and outright disinformation. The results in different parts of the world ranged from social media flame wars to panic on the streets.

The legal obstructionism of the media barons was clearly not going to hold up, with the first cases being struck down in hours. Every delay was costly, however, as proto-spaces appeared undetected around the globe. In less than three days, they would start spilling monsters directly into the world.

Farrah had been part of an international task force with hundreds of members from Network branches all around the world to investigate the blackouts. While they had considered a complete collapse of grid functionality a low-probability outcome, contingency plans had been put into place and were currently being carried out.

The core of the response was a program to actively search for proto-spaces by getting Network ritualists out into the field. Farrah's expertise and her studies of the grid had made her a lead in the contingency project, developing a ritual for just that purpose. It had to be simple enough to be employed by those with minimal ritualism skills, efficient enough that it wouldn't break the spirit coin bank yet wide-area enough to actually be worth using.

Farrah had given Jason an item for his trip that allowed him to track proto-spaces, but replicating that item was not a viable solution. On top of the cost to mass-produce it, it was only able to find proto-spaces and not the apertures into them. Only Jason had the power to enter the spaces directly.

Although it was only a side project to the investigation into the grid blackouts, Farrah had taken the contingency ritual through several iterative improvements before disseminating it. It was simple enough that a ritualist in every branch had been made proficient in its use, which was paying off as they taught it to others in turn.

The contingency plans being put into action were a poor substitute for the grid. In addition to tying up personnel and consuming resources, they could only monitor tiny slices of area compared to the coverage of the grid. As a result, the decision had been

made to focus on thorough scanning of population centres over maximising total coverage. The result was that Network ritualists would be deployed prioritising population centres. Major cities were critical both for population and infrastructure, which made preventing monster outbreaks critical.

The tradeoffs for this approach were not easy to swallow. The Network had the people to cover major cities in most of the developed world, but rural and isolated areas would be left unprotected. The impact on agricultural regions would be extreme once hordes of monsters were roaming the countryside but covering expansive regions with minimal population wasn't a viable option. The problem was the food shortages that this would eventually lead to.

Some areas of the world lacked the proper Network coverage to cover even the major population centres. The area most impacted by this was Russia, which was largely dominated by the Cabal. The Network branches there had always been operating in a borderline state of effectiveness and the new challenges would be something they were not equipped to meet. The International Committee was working to remedy this but there were already too many fires to put out.

The situation in Russia was part of the impetus for the Network to reach out to the Cabal. The places where the Network was weakest were often those where the Cabal was strongest and the idea of supplementing Network assets with cabal resources was being actively explored.

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"Asano," Anna called out as she emerged through the rooftop door. Kaito turned from where he was directing people as they loaded crates onto his helicopter.

"Committeewoman," Kaito greeted after jogging from the helipad to meet her.

"I heard that some of my fellow committeepersons had conscripted you to take their scattered family members to their family compounds."

The members of the Steering Committee were all old family Network, including Anna herself. The kind of work the Asano family had done on their own compound, the old families had put in place decades ago. They didn't have the expertise of Farrah as a guiding hand, but the accumulated knowledge and resources of generations was not to be dismissed.

"You have your own family," Anna continued. "Things are going to get rough and you should make sure they're taken care of."

“Jason is dealing with that,” Kaito said. “He’ll see them right and then come here to help with logistics. Right now, I’m needed here. There’s a lot more people than just our families who are going to need help.”

“No kidding,” Anna said. “I can’t help but notice that you aren’t ferrying committee family members.”

“Farrah told them all to go jump,” Kaito said. “She scares them.”

“She should. You’re moving resources for the dimensional space detection contingency?”

“People, resources, whatever it takes.”

“I’ll let you get back to it, then,” Anna said.

“Jason said he’ll come here once our family has been rounded up,” Kaito said. “He can move a lot of people through those portals of his, you should get him ferrying people. Let him sort out those committee people’s families, if only to stop them throwing their weight around.”

“Can’t your brother only portal to places he’s been before?”

“Farrah had him scope out all the Network family compounds for reference before he went on his trip,” Kaito said. “He can portal right to them.”

Kaito turned and headed back for the helicopter. As he approached he snapped his fingers and it started spinning its rotors.

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Anna returned to the chaos of the operations centre, where Ketevan was marshalling the chaos like a general in the midst of battle. As Director of Operations, she had a lot more to do than Anna, whose oversight role had been reduced to Asya looping her in on International Committee directives as she passed them onto Ketevan. It had always been the case the IC didn’t have actual authority over the branches but with a global crisis, any branch not getting with the program was dooming the people they should be protecting.

Anna waited for a rare lull and made her way into what used to be her own office.

“Keti,” Anna said. “I’m pretty much useless at this point. Do you have anywhere I can make myself useful?”

“Absolutely,” Ketevan said. “We’ve got a bunch of people coming in from the EOA looking to defect.”

“Defect?”

“The rank and file didn’t know what the people in charge were doing. Once the grid went down, orders started coming in and a lot of them didn’t like it when they realised what

was happening. They've started to approach Network branches all over looking to contribute."

"Isn't there a concern about infiltration?" Anna asked.

"Of course there is," Ketevan said. "Right now, though, we need warm bodies and information, and they have both. I'd love for you to take that whole mess off my hands."

"Alright," Anna said. "Point me in the right direction."

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While the Network was in chaos, in a quiet, still and largely empty stretch of Arizona desert, an old shed sat a few miles from a town that wasn't much more than a gas station, a bar and a pervasive sense of having been left behind by life.

No one had gone to the old building in years and the gate lock on the chain-link fence had long ago rusted shut. None of the locals remembered it being anything but abandoned, with the only surprise being that it hadn't fallen down yet.

The building was largely empty, which made the two things that were present stand out. The more ordinary one was a 2002 Pontiac Firebird in pewter metallic, covered by a dusty car sheet.

The other object was significantly more extraordinary, and likewise covered in a sheet. It was a glass cylinder filled with a liquid that only looked like water, radiating cold despite not being connected to any kind of cooling device. The truly unusual part was the naked woman floating in the liquid, neither truly alive nor truly dead.

What the sheet did not cover was the magical diagram that had been cut into the concrete floor, seemingly with a saw, in a circle around the glass cylinder and its bizarre contents. It was covered in dirt and dust, as were the piles of spirit coins placed in locations around the circle.

The small town did not have anyone with magic, regardless of what old Raquel would claim about her psychic powers. There was no one to sense the disembodied soul approach from the west, enter the building and slip into the body in the tank.

After sitting dormant for many years, light started shining from the lines of the magical diagram on the floor. One by one, the spirit coins within it disappeared and the liquid within the tank started to glow. Finally, the now embodied soul, opened her eyes. The glass shattered sending icy liquid flooding across the floor and she staggered out, eyes blinking in confusion. She moved to the car, leaning heavily on it as she worked her lungs for the first time.

Eventually her mind and body came into sync as her soul imprinted her memories onto the still-pliable brain. She was disoriented, uncertain as to how long the process had

taken by the time she regained lucidity. She had never really expected it to work, but after what happened, she knew it was her only chance. If she had played along, they would have watched her every moment, ever ready to swing the axe. Better to take the risk and seize the initiative.

She pulled the cover off the car and peered into the side mirror, seeing a face fifteen years younger than it should be looking back. It was not the face of Mrs South, which was a name she had now surrendered. She was once again Audrey Blaine, and she was hungry.



## Chapter 350

### Humanity

"...brother of celebrity chef Erika Asano, shown here actually appeared on his sister's cooking program. He was declared legally dead for a year and a half after an explosion in his apartment building, which the Victoria Police at the time put down to a gas explosion. Subsequent enquiries have revealed that the building in question had no gas service, pointing to a quick and quiet cover-up. This in turn leads to questions about how long authorities have known about Asano and what appear to be his extraordinary abilities..."

"You're more famous than Eri now, little brother," Kaito said. "Why did you make a big display on the beach like that? It wouldn't have taken you that much longer to do it quietly. Hell, with the commotion, it probably would have gone faster. Then you show your face with all those people using camera phones."

Jason and Kaito were watching news footage with the augmented reality goggles provided by Kaito's helicopter as they rapidly flew over the Australian outback. A passive ability from his swift essence let Kaito's helicopter outpace any ordinary helicopter, even at iron-rank. He had several active abilities that could give it a further boost but he was holding off on those.

Endurance was the theme of the day as they used Kaito's helicopter to sweep the country for proto spaces. Even at Kaito's speed, they couldn't cover the whole country, but while Jason was busy shepherding the Steering Committee members' families around, Kaito and the operations team were plotting out a plan that maximised coverage. Instead of a grid sweep, they would hop from one population centre to the next through inland Australia.

The Network ritualists would stick to the coast, which required the least travel and had the most people. All in all, Australia had it quite lucky. Despite a landmass comparable to the contiguous United States, Australia had only a fraction of the population, almost all of which clung to the coast.

The logistics of sweeping for proto-spaces wasn't easy, but it was less troublesome than if the country wasn't mostly empty. The simplified search ritual Farrah developed was being deployed alongside anyone with even a rudimentary grasp of ritual magic. Even Emi had been roped in, with Taika, Greg and the silver-ranker, Ruth as her protection detail. The now thirteen-year-old, courtesy of Farrah's personal instruction, was a better ritualist than many in the Network.

Jason and Kaito weren't the only ones being sent inland to patrol the smaller centres, but they were the most efficient. Kaito's speed and Jason's ability to duck into a proto-space, assassinate the anchor monsters and leave again allowed them to cover more space than any other team in the country. Their schedule was to go inland across New South Wales, up through the Northern Territory, back east into Queensland and then loop back south through New South Wales to Sydney. They would be covering as much as a quarter of the country, or at least as much as they could before monsters started turning up.

The grid compass Farrah had given to Jason for his walkabout originally worked by tapping into the Network's grid, alerting him to nearby proto-spaces. She had modified it to directly sense proto-spaces itself, which diminished its effectiveness, but not so much as to make it useless. It continued to trade off range for the inability to detect apertures, making it mostly useful to Jason.

Other teams were roaming around, some of which had been given replica dimensional compasses. They were markedly less effective, however, lacking both Kaito's mobility and Jason's ability to enter a proto-space directly. This forced the other teams, on finding a proto-space, to take the time to hunt down the aperture and open it. Only then could strike teams move in to hunt the anchor monsters and negate the threat.

Fortunately, the strike teams had been retrained by Farrah and were able to act with speed and confidence. It wasn't a match for Jason entering the astral space directly and hunting the anchor monsters with Shade's vehicle forms, but it was better than what had been possible a year earlier.

"I don't understand why you let people film you with your hood down," Kaito said.

"What I can do is terrifying," Jason said. "Even in the other world, the way I fight had people comparing me to the monsters. In a very short amount of time, this world will start seeing monsters."

"You don't want to be lumped in with what's coming," Kaito realised. "You're using this time before the dimensional entities start arriving to have the media humanise you."

"Yes. For whatever reason, the EOA had been playing me up instead of shutting me down in terms of media coverage. I might as well use it."

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Audrey Blaine felt very odd as she drove along an Arizona highway. Her new body had been in stasis for more than a dozen years, the last remnant of a secret program whose progenitors were all dead. That was something she had made very sure of, a long time ago.

Thirty years ago, a very secret collaboration of personnel from the Network, the Cabal and the Engineers of Ascension had been enacted, without their parent organisations being made aware. Researchers from each group came together in an attempt to take projects from each faction that had plateaued in their development and push them forward using the knowledge and the resources of the others.

The resulting advancements in EOA and Cabal projects benefited both groups without either realising the source of the breakthroughs. The comparatively limited advancement of the Network programs proved the group's downfall as disgruntled Network researchers leaked the group's existence.

The three factions proceeded to eliminate the group, with Audrey in charge of the EOA purge contingent. The EOA was delighted with what the group had delivered to them but were unwilling to allow the potential security risk should their long-term goals be compromised. The work done already was enough for the EOA to move forward on their own.

That assignment had been the start of her rise as she ruthlessly excised the researchers. Her ambitions were what led her to assemble her own team to poach what they could, even as she was praised for destroying everything. In the wake of the program's seeming destruction, Audrey's hand-picked people continued.

In the end, she became wary of her own researchers as her rising career brought increased scrutiny and their skeletons remained buried out in the desert. She purged everything except for one thing, the body she was now inhabiting.

The body in the tank was based on a research path the original team rejected due to the extreme incorporation of Cabal and Network materials and methods. As this meant it couldn't be introduced to the mainstream EOA, the research path was redirected, despite the promising results. Audrey's own team had no such compunctions.

The body in the tank was cloned from Audrey's own DNA by her team, who accepted means and methods that the original team had rejected. Biological material provided by the Cabal was heavily incorporated, its mystical properties maintained by processes learned from the Network.

The EOA's modern converted people were much more advanced than the early version developed by the original secret research collaboration. The ability to create stable, silver-rank converted was the impetus for finally putting their plans into motion. Plans that had originated back with the crude, early, iron-rank converted.

Even so, the converted remained relatively simple and almost synthetic in their powers and development. They were the result of external forces being applied to individuals, rather than building such individuals from the ground up.

The key to the EOA methods had been the soul modification methods developed by the original team. Once they discovered that the critical element to accessing the soul was consent, the secrets of the Cabal and the Network allowed them to unlock the path to change, transforming ordinary people into magical powerhouses.

Audrey's body was new to her but of an age with the early, iron-rank converted. Unlike the converted, though, her body's abilities were more holistic, inherent and exotic, courtesy of the biological material provided by the Cabal. She didn't know what had gone into the inception of her body, and even its creators had been unsure of what it would be capable of.

The reason Audrey had kept this one project hidden away after eliminating even her own team was the magical connection she had to it. Audrey was the basis for the bulk of the body's biomass. The magic matrix that governed it, something possessed by all living things, was based on Audrey but reinforced using Network methodology.

Audrey's team believed that the result was a latent bond that would allow Audrey herself to occupy the empty vessel should anything happen to her original body. This was similar to an ability some members of the Cabal enjoyed, creating empty vessel replicants of their bodies to be inhabited after death.

So long as their souls never made it to the astral, this did not draw the attention of the Reaper. Once a soul entered the astral it was the Reaper's to govern, but until then it was the affair of the local death god, if any. The Reaper's concern was not with cheating death but coming back from it once the soul passed on to the astral.

The bond served as a tether for the soul, guiding it to the new body. It was the reason she had refused the magical augmentations that her position in the EOA offered. Although the potential of the bond was untested, she did not want to risk severing it. It was the reason why she had looked the eldest of the Four Cardinals, despite Mr North and Mrs West both being her senior.

After all those years, Audrey had finally tested it out, with success that both surprised and relieved her. Her new body felt strong and potent, although it was possessed of an unnerving power that she was yet to understand. She felt like a child wearing new clothes that had been bought for her to grow into.

One thing about her body she was very aware of, was that it was hungry for power. The car had contained a small fortune in spirit coins taken from the Network years

previous; mostly bronze coins but even some precious silvers. The first thing she had done after steadying herself enough to move around properly was to shove bronze coins into her mouth, one after the other. Each left the electric tingle on her tongue of licking a battery but their power felt hollow, like diet soda of the soul. Ten of the coins vanished into her mouth before she was sated. She felt a craving for the silver coins but steeled herself to keep them in reserve.

Her senses were far more powerful than those she had had in her old body. More than once as she drove along the highway she had been forced to pull over with vertiginous sensory overload. Even the monochrome, empty desert was capable of overwhelming her. She saw things far in the distance; colours she didn't know existed. The dry air on her skin told a story of the weather and her location that she understood on an instinctive level. She had the concerning sensation of the instincts behind that sense not being entirely human.

Sitting the driver's seat by the side of the road as her dizzyingly overwhelming senses settled once more, she considered her options moving forward. The smart move would ordinarily be to stay dead, collect the resources she had hidden away and live quietly on a beach somewhere. With the complications likely to arise from her new body and a world facing a monster apocalypse, this was not a viable approach.

The EOA's plan was precipitously close to the next phase, the media interference preventing the Network from effectively seizing the initiative before the monsters started to appear. She couldn't go back the EOA, nor would she. There was the Cabal, with whom she had contacts, and they might even see her as one of their own, now. She had no idea what their response to the EOA's actions would be, though, and she would be tarred with the same brush, even after leaving them.

That meant the Network. She didn't have as strong connections there but she did have leverage. The information she possessed was exactly what they were going to need. Even so, she hesitated. They would likely be even more hostile than the Cabal and there was an outside chance some local goon might decide to torture what she knew out of her. It was unlikely anyone would take the risk with what was currently at stake, but it was something she was wary of.

She thought about what she had done, standing up to the other cardinals. She was not a decent human being. The decent part was long gone and now the human part was gone with it. But there had to be a line. She wasn't going to become a monster, which is why she could not tolerate letting civilisation crumble in a grasp for power.

She'd had to walk to the gas station to get the car running. The petrol in the can in the shed had long since degraded. Fortunately, the money stash had not. She'd bought a cheap burner phone while she was there but she didn't have any of her contacts saved. Like everyone else, she had given up memorising phone numbers years before. She did know where to find the Network branch in Phoenix though, so once her head cleared, she started up the car and continued on.

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Jason and Kaito were flying over an Indigenous community in the Northern Territory that wasn't large enough to be spared a Network presence, which was true of most of the outback. Jason blurred and vanished from the passenger seat of the helicopter as he phased into the proto-space. It was something that continued to unnerve Kaito, even when he knew it was coming.

Kaito landed to rest and recover some mana, consuming an iron-rank coin for himself and feeding one to the helicopter through a slot on the outside of the helicopter. The slot had originally been in the cockpit but every person who saw him use a spirit coin on the helicopter made a coin-operated joke. Now, when he conjured the helicopter, the coin intake was located in a discreet spot on the exterior.

Twenty minutes later, his helicopter detected a strong aura burst a few kilometres away and he moved to pick Jason up. Jason had emerged from the proto-space after hunting the anchor monsters.

"Any problems?" Kaito asked as Jason stepped aboard.

"Nah, the anchor monsters were only bronze. No flyers, either, so Shade just flew me right over the trash. It would be nice if I could bring you into the spaces with me."

"We both know that won't be happening."

Jason could only transition into proto-spaces alone and there was no way Kaito trusted Jason enough to enter his spirit vault.

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "There is an issue that has arisen at the family compound."

"Didn't we decide to call it Asano Village?"

"That proposal was rejected," Shade said. "Discussions are ongoing, although the situation is generally too chaotic for such organisational concerns. There is still some contention as to the necessity of moving to the compound, despite your warnings and demonstrations."

"People have been watching the stories that say I'm either a hoax or a killer?"

“They have,” Shade said. “The latest family-related problem is quite different, however. A woman has arrived from Japan claiming that she wants to test your worthiness to carry the Asano name.”

“Bugger that,” Kaito said. “No one gets to tell us if we can carry our own damn name.” Jason glanced at his brother and they shared a nod.

“Damn right,” Jason said.

“What would you like me to do until you get back, Mr Asano?” Shade asked.

“Find that lady and tell her to park her worthiness where the sun doesn’t shine.”

“Very well,” Shade said. “If you do not mind, however, I would prefer to paraphrase.”

## Chapter 351

### Media Blitz

Jeremy Westin was surprised to find a freshly-sealed road leading all the way into the isolated bushland area. He followed it to a gate in a chain wire fence, where a sign marked further progress as a private road. There seemed to be something off about the fence but he would need to look closer to identify what it was.

Next to the gate was a security booth. It was circular and made up almost entirely of mirrored glass that didn't allow him to see inside, giving it an unnerving panopticon effect. The fence intersected the circle in the middle, leaving half of the building on each side of the fence. The glass building was incongruously modern amongst the pleasant, bushland surrounds. He wondered about the legality of something that could throw off blinding reflections, although it didn't seem to be doing that at all, despite the sunshine beaming right onto it. Taking a second look, the lack of glare coming off of it was actually quite unusual.

Jeremy pulled up in front of the gate, turned off his car and waited. No one came out and he wondered if the small building wasn't the security station he assumed but some kind of art installation. He stepped out, looking closer at the fence. Instead of the traditional chain-link pattern, the wiring on this fence was deeply varied, as if someone had tried to make a tapestry from a wire fence. The fence also looked a little different in texture and colour to steel mesh he'd seen in the past, but that could easily be a matter of the galvanisation process.

The wiring was shaped into what looked like ideographs from a language he didn't know, and not the same ones in a loop. He suspected that someone who knew the language in question would be able to read the fence like a book, although what language that was eluded him. The closest thing he had seen was hieroglyphs developed by Catholics trying to convert First Nations people in Canada.

He heard a helicopter faintly overhead, although he didn't spot it when he craned his neck to look for it. He walked up to the glass building, of which the only non-glass portion was a steel section on each side where the fence terminated against the wall. There did not appear to be doors. Walking around as much as he could, the building seemed to be made from two complete, unbroken glass curves, one on each side of the fence. He tried cupping his hands to peer through the glass but its reflective surface was impenetrable.

It turned out that there was a door, so seamlessly integrated that Jeremy had missed it entirely. A panel of glass retracted, slightly, with a quiet hiss of air, before sliding out of



the way. It would have revealed the interior of the building if not for an interior wall made of Māori.

“G’day,” Taika said. “Who are you, and why can’t you read the sign? It’s a private road, bro. How about you bugger off so I can go back to looking up photos of Jason Statham with hair?”

Jeremy opened his mouth to speak but a voice behind him beat him to the punch.

“He’s a journalist. Telling them to leave just encourages them.”

Jeremy turned around to see the person behind him. He recognised the face of Jason Asano from the storm of media surrounding the reveal of the two personas, the Starlight Rider and the Starlight Angel. First had come the Angel at the children's hospital, then the Rider in a rolling gunfight on motorcycles. From the beginning, there was debate over whether the two were the same, given that one brought life and the other death.

Rumours linking them to events across Asia and then Africa only fuelled speculation, culminating in the West Africa EVD outbreak. Despite denials from humanitarian workers, rumours persisted of a man who passed through the camps like a miracle healer.

The person healing people in camps was not draped in starlight but described as a mixed-race Asian man. The parallels with the first stories of the Starlight Angel were obvious, however. It was in the wake of this that a small team of journalists starting putting the pieces together and bringing all the events to light. They dug up amateur phone footage, suppressed news stories and myriad firsthand accounts.

Debate flared as to whether the reported events really did or even could take place. The stories and even the footage was so fantastical that most of it was dismissed as hoaxes and film manipulation. Was the Rider, filmed horrifically killing groups of people, the same Starlight Angel being praised as a merciful messenger from God? The reported appearance of other figures, including the dark riders shown in the helicopter news footage from Sydney only muddied the waters.

When the government started releasing a series of inconsistent and ominous public announcements, suddenly there was an explosion in new information about the enigmatic man of starlight. New stories, new footage. A whole slew of reports from China, reportedly suppressed by the government, of a man helping earthquake victims with superhuman powers.

Then the Rider revealed his identity in a small coastal town in New South Wales, captured in a bevy of phone footage. It was so blatant that there was little doubt that the Rider revealed himself to the world on purpose, but he literally vanished. Recordings of the

incident showed many people, primarily Asano's family, appearing to vanish through a magic archway.

Once again there were claims of hoax and doctored footage. Even so, the media immediately turned piranha, descending on the sleepy beach town in a frenzy. What they discovered was that every member of the Asano family had decamped from the town entirely, leaving reporters to scour the town for whatever they could find.

Information started coming in thick and fast. Jason Asano was the brother of a celebrity chef, and footage of his appearances was being juxtaposed with footage from his activities as the Rider. The joking man bantering with his sister as they demonstrated recipes together was a world away from the one massacring drug-fuelled bikers or fighting like a demon when cornered and outnumbered in a Hanoi slum. There was no recorded footage of him ever healing anyone, despite the repeated stories.

The fact that he had been declared legally dead in a hastily covered-up explosion was a key focus of media analysis. Some even postulated that the current Jason Asano was actually an impostor, citing physical differences from his television appearances before and after his reported demise.

Jeremy had sent one of his junior reporters to Casselton Beach, along with the gaggle from other outlets, where unusual stories were turning up from interviewed townsfolk. Asano driving around in a variety of black supercars or being filmed performing elaborate feats of parkour in a park. Some local teenagers found their view counts hitting the stratosphere as their recordings of Jason's parkour antics were revealed in the mainstream media.

Those videos fuelled further speculation regarding an unknown woman apparently putting Asano's young niece through a rigorous training program, including after Jason stopped appearing. That the timing coincided with the activities around the world only cemented Jason as the man of mystery.

Interviews with locals revealed that Asano had been living on an enormous houseboat that appeared out of nowhere one morning and was now gone, just as mysteriously. The houseboat seemed to be a hub of strange activity, from a science-fiction looking helicopter coming and going to strange lights at night to people flying over the water in jet suits that had yet to be released anywhere in the world, let alone, Australia.

The sum total of all these oddities was a media vortex that threatened to swallow up the public warnings being issued as people tried to find the man who could reportedly perform miracles. As a professional participant in the media landscape, Jeremy recognised that something with a lot of power was pushing the Asano narrative hard. There was a lot

of interest in the story, to be sure, but his seasoned sensibilities told him that someone wanted the story painting over whatever else might be going on.

Even so, investigating that meant, like everyone else, investigating Asano. Doing his legwork, he managed to dig up some information about land purchases by Asano's uncle. Looking into Hiro Asano, he discovered that Hiro had been connected to organised crime in Sydney, until just before Jason Asano rose from the grave. At that point he completely extricated himself and moved back to his hometown, living on Jason's houseboat

Further digging led Jeremy to well-buried records relating to a construction project on the expensive chunk of bushland Hiro had purchased. Suspecting this to be the location of the vanished Asano family, Jeremy had come to investigate and now found himself face-to-face with Jason Asano.

There was no indication of how Jason had arrived unnoticed. There was no other vehicle and they were standing in open bushland. At a glance, he seemed a world away from the stories surrounding him, leaning casually against Jeremy's car in shorts, sandals and a Decepticons t-shirt. He had a look of amusement on his face but something in his eyes left Jeremy unsettled. It left him feeling naked, as if Asano was looking at his very soul.

"Hello, Mr Westin," Jason said. "Taika, this is Jeremy Westin. He runs an independent news website called The Westin Front; one of a handful trying to squeak around the media monopoly and do some actual journalism. His speculation about the terrorist readiness exercises has been way off the mark but he's usually pretty good."

"You're Jason Asano," Jeremy said.

"So people keep telling me, but I saw on the news that I'm actually someone else."

"Are you?"

"No. Everyone changes, Mr Westin. I'm not exceptional in that regard."

Jeremy heard fake coughing behind him.

Cough "—load of bull shi—" cough.

Jeremy turned to look at the giant Māori. He turned back to Asano to see that his car had vanished.

"My car."

"We'll take mine," Jason said.

"Yours?"

A terrifying cloud of shadows erupted from Asano, then coalesced into what looked an oversized black hypercar that would not have seemed out of place in a Batman movie. The gullwing doors opened of their own volition and Jason ducked into the driver's seat.

Jeremy stood frozen on the spot, eyes like poached eggs. He almost stumbled over when Taika gave him an encouraging slap on the back. Jason leaned over in the car to speak to Jeremy through the open door.

"Mr Westin – can I call you Jeremy? Jeremy, I don't have a lot of time, for reasons that will become apparent with tragic alacrity. That means that I need you to make a choice now: either get in and learn the single biggest secret on this planet or I give your car back and you leave. You're the first to find us, but your contemporaries will be close behind and I can give one of them the story instead."

Jeremy blinked, still getting over the one-two punch of overt magic and a back slap that seemed to have realigned several vertebrae. He warily entered the car, looking around at the interior like it would champ down and bite him. The gullwing doors closed and his face showed a trapped expression.

"So what do you think of the security booth?" Jason asked.

"What? Uh, it's an odd piece of glasswork. That reflective treatment seems unusual."

"It's not actually glass," Jason said. "That's the cool thing. It's an aluminium-based ceramic. With a few tweaks."

In front of them, the gate started rolling aside and Jeremy's eyes fell on the fencing again.

"Tweaks?" he asked. "Like the wire on the fence?"

"Good eye," Jason said as the car started moving. Jeremy noticed that Asano wasn't touching the steering wheel or the pedals, but he'd conjured the car out of solid shadows, so that wasn't really worth mentioning.

"Things are about to get crazy," Jason said. "The big news companies are using me to mask the very important warnings trying to go out, although I think the government announcements are doing better in countries where more than two companies are owning ninety percent of the media. I don't have to tell you that."

"Why are you showing me these things?" a rattled Jeremy asked.

"Because either today or tomorrow, an interdimensional war with an endless, unrelenting enemy is going to start across the world."

"What?"

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Jason drew into the main thoroughfare of the family village, parking in front of the large residence. Erika was waiting for him out front. The street was awash with activity, with many stopping to look as Jason pulled up. Mostly they were Asanos, but not all. Jason spotted Taika's mum loudly directing people as she organised something inside of

the gathering halls. She gave Jason a wave and then went back to yelling at some of Jason's cousins who had paused in the process of carrying a table.

"What's up, Eri?" Jason asked as he stepped out of the car.

"Shade tells me you've been explaining magic to a reporter."

"Someone is clearly building up a specific narrative. I figure that we use the attention on me to put our own out there."

"Ignoring the fact that what you just described is the network's job, not ours, Shade told me that you were doing the explaining yourself."

"Who else was going to do it?"

"Shade, or anyone else that isn't you."

"He needs to know."

"Assuming that's true, you're literally the worst person to explain it to him."

"I'm not that bad."

"So you haven't been dropping bombs with zero context to see how googly you can make his eyes go?"

"Shade, you're a traitor," Jason said.

"Fun is for people with time," Shade said from Erika's shadow. "We have very little of it, so I decided that your sister would be the better introduction for Mr Westin. All you did was unnerve the man for your own amusement."

Jason groaned his concession and he and Erika turned to where Jeremy was still in the car. Jeremy yelped as the car dissolved into darkness around him and he fell to the ground while the shadows were being drawn into Jason's shadow. Jason helped Jeremy to his feet as a motorised scooter came zipping along the thoroughfare.

"Uncle Jason!"

Emi didn't fully stop the scooter before stepping off, allowing the momentum to carry her into a power hug.

"G'day, Moppet," Jason said, returning the hug. "I thought you'd be off working for the Network."

"Farrah had them assign me to Coffs because it's closer to home. I have my own security escort!"

"Someone reliable, I hope."

"It's Ruth and Greg, since they aren't working with Uncle Kai right now."

Jason could sense them both, meandering in the direction of the main thoroughfare. Emi didn't need constant guarding when she was with family.

"Speaking of Kai," Erika said, "Jason, how long before you two are back in the air?"

“Enough time to sleep,” Jason said. “Once Kaito is back at full charge, we’re back at it. The goal is to set up a series of potential teleport destinations so I can get around the country by hopscotching portals. I can portal to anyplace I can halfway remember, so I’m just hanging out on various places while Kaito takes a break. ”

“Let me take care of the journalist,” Erika said. “Emi can take you to our other guest and then I’ll bring the reporter back to you for an interview before you hit the sack.”

“The other guest being our Japanese visitor?” Jason asked. He could already sense an unfamiliar silver-ranker. She was a core-user but her aura had none of the usual sloppiness. Instead, it was clean and sharp.

“Yes,” Erika confirmed.

As Jason’s thoughts drifting to core users, he noticed the absence of his sister in law.

“Amy’s not here?” Jason asked.

"She's still organising civic preparedness for when things kick-off," Erika said.

The Casselton region was too scattered to warrant a permanent Network scanning presence. The Network had foisted the area onto Jason, despite his having evacuated his family. It wouldn’t take too much of his time to portal in and check the area for proto-spaces every couple of days between patrols. The concern was that a manifestation out of his dimensional compass range could lead to a dimensional breach in a neighbouring area. Once the monsters arrived, there was nothing to stop them from wandering in.

For this reason, Amy, as mayor, was preparing to commandeer all the accommodation in the tourist towns of Casselton Beach, Castle Heads and Casselton North. They all fell comfortably inside the range of the compass, if used in the central town of the three, Castle Heads.

Once people started realising the new reality about to descend on them, Amy would be ready to collect most of the regional populace into the three towns. It wouldn’t prevent monsters arriving from out of range but was better than just leaving people to their fates. Few small towns had as much protection.

“Alright, Jeremy,” Jason said. “I’m going to leave you in the capable hands of my sister while I go deal with the Next Damn Thing. Emi, lead the way.”

## Chapter 352

### Grandmotherly Advice

"We've got her in the guest wing of the main house," Emi said.

"There's a guest wing?" Jason asked.

"It's better than the holding cells, plus only Farrah would be able to get her in there."

"There are holding cells?"

"Farrah thought we would need somewhere to handle intruders until we figure out what to do with them. Plus, a drunk tank. We even have a magically reinforced divvy van. It's all in the administration quarter."

"That's thorough planning, I guess."

"She's up here," Emi said as she pointed at the section of the main residence ahead of them. Jason stopped walking.

"No she's not," he said.

"She's meant to be," Emi pouted.

Jason ruffled his niece's hair and she shoved his hand away, annoyed.

"It seems she wanted a look around. You run off, Moppet, and I'll sort it out."

"I want to see."

"Shade," Jason said.

Shadows emerged out of Jason and Emi's shadows, wreathing Emi in a jet suit that took off and flew her away with a yelp.

"I'll get you Uncle Jason!" her voice rang out of the village as Jason laughed, giving her a wave as she disappeared over a rooftop.

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Asano Akari watched a girl spitting invective fly past the rooftop on which she was crouched. She frowned at the unusual sight.

"There are dark days ahead," a voice said and she stood up, whirling to face it. She hadn't sensed his presence at all, despite her silver-rank hearing and aura senses. She still couldn't make out his aura despite his being close enough that she should be able to smell him, which she couldn't.

"We should take our fun where we can get it," Jason said. "There's sadness enough to come."

"You are Asano Jason."

"Seriously, what is with people? Do I have amnesiac tattooed on my forehead?"

"I am Asano Akari," she said.

“G’day. I know we named this place Asano Village but you came an awful long way to visit.”

Examining the woman, Jason was struck by how much the woman resembled the sword at her hip. Her body and aura both were lean and sharp. The way she moved was swift, precise and efficient. Her hair was cinched back in a practical ponytail, her clothes were sleek and fitted while her face had the polished perfection of silver-rank. Although they did not look the same, Jason couldn’t help but be reminded of his first encounter with Sophie. This woman was all sharp edges.

He glanced at the sword hanging from her belt. It was a chokutō, a Japanese straight sword, and his magical senses told him it wasn't conjured. It was a genuine magical item of exquisite craftsmanship, at least physically. For the magical component, he would need to look closer.

People with weapon essences fell into three camps. One conjured their weapons, usually with multiple options for multiple situations. Another used the best weapon of their type that they could find, using their abilities to enhance them further. The last type did both, using their real weapon personally and employing conjured weapons for various unusual attacks and abilities. The weapon essence users Jason knew well, Valdis and Gary, fell into the second category, although he had met individuals of all three types.

“I’ve been told why you’re here,” Jason said, “but that didn't come across as very flattering as regarding your intentions. How about you tell me about why you've come here and we go from there.”

She looked Jason over. He looked like anyone off the street with his casual clothes, but his undetectable aura gave that the lie. He seemed to be standing at ease, but she could spot his careful balance, ready to move in an instant.

“You are of the assassination type,” she said.

“If you could call a man with an axe a tree assassin,” Jason replied. “It takes some hacking away to get the job done.”

“You accumulate damaging effects instead of making a decisive strike. Unusual for someone with a focus on stealth.”

“Really? When you’re waiting for a monster the size of a traditional rustic cottage to die, good stealth feels like exactly the thing you want, trust me.”

“Many believe that our powers reflect our true natures. Your way of fighting lacks honour.”

“Yep,” Jason agreed with a chuckle, looking at the sword on her hip. “Honour is how people with fancy swords fight people with sticks and claim it’s a fair fight.”



“That is a poor characterisation of honour.”

“And you came to my house to tell me I have none, which is a poor demonstration of respect.”

Akari nodded, acknowledging the point.

“I passed the first test, then?” Jason asked. “Something along the lines of not flipping out when provoked?”

“The assessment is ongoing,” Akari said.

“Then the next question is what gives you the right to come here to judge me and mine?”

“My family has been part of the Network of centuries. When you rose to prominence, we investigated your background and we do, indeed, have a shared ancestor.”

“That’s a fun fact that doesn’t answer my question. How far back is this ancestor, out of curiosity?”

“Early Edo period,” she said.

“The seventeenth century? Not exactly second cousins, then, are we? Which makes me wonder again why I should give a damn about anything you have to say about how we do things here.”

“My family believes in honour, dignity—”

“You keep talking about your family but I didn’t ask about them and I don’t care. State your business.”

She gave him a flat, steely glare that had no discernible impact.

“We have neither the right nor any interest in telling your family how to behave,” Akari said. “How you handle your affairs is your concern and your concern alone.”

“Glad we got that settled,” Jason said. “I don’t know where you parked but the guy at the gate will let you out. I think they’ll start closing airports pretty soon, so you might want to get a move on.”

“My family is well known in Network circles,” she said.

“Aaaand we’re back to the family. If there’s any kind of point you’re edging up on, that would be great. It’s kind of a busy week for me.”

“You have started to shape your family into a clan,” she said. “How you conduct yourselves is not our affair, but you share our name. If you flounder and collapse, that reflects on us, fairly or not. We don’t care what you do, only that you are strong. Right now, your nascent clan stands or falls with you.”

“So you came to make sure I had the goods so this whole project doesn’t collapse in a pile and make you look bad.”

“Yes.”

“So what happens now?” Jason asked. “We fight?”

“That would be pointless,” Akari said. “Your capability in that area is well-documented, but you cannot carry a clan on the strength of arms alone. You need leadership. Management. Foresight. You need to choose subordinates well and raise your people up as a whole. You have to weather setbacks and resolve challenges. Know when to stand firm and when to bend. This last one is something we have heard may be your weakness, yet can be the most important.”

“That doesn’t sound like the kind of assessment where you do a quick few interviews and pass out a survey,” Jason said.

“No. It will be extensive, carried out in a time of challenge and transition. If you can thrive in the coming days then we will be satisfied.”

“And why should we put up with any of this?” Jason asked. “You have no authority over me or my people and acting like you do is kind of giving me the irk.”

“For the duration of the assessment, you will have something that your fledgling clan very much needs: an additional, expert category three.”

“You’ll come work for us while you’re doing your little checks?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll actually do what you’re told? We already have the obnoxiously independent leadership position filled.”

“I will act as directed, within reason, and make clear beforehand when asked to operate beyond the limits I am willing to tolerate.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “I’ll take it to the family and we’ll talk it out. What happens if we tell you to take a hike?”

“Then I will leave and we will hope that your clan is consumed in the coming crisis, which is an acceptable demise that will not reflect poorly on us. Should you survive, once things have settled, then further action will be considered.”

“Good to know.”

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Jason sought out his paternal grandmother. Her name was Yumi, although anyone that used it got a glare that stung like a slap across the ear. Yumi had been fully versed in magic during Jason’s time away, through the Network’s induction program.

She had one of the bushland residences, nestled amongst the trees. Jason sensed her up on the balcony and leapt two stories up with his cloak floating around him, which disappeared as he alighted on the wooden floor.

“Polite people knock,” Yumi told him from over a cup of tea. She was sitting at an outdoor table made from native wood.

“I was hoping you could help me with something, Grandmother.”

“This is about our visitor?”

“You’re the only member of the family who was actually Japanese. I was hoping you could share some insights.”

Yumi had come over from Japan with her late husband, shortly before their first child was born. Things had not been easy for Japanese immigrants in the seventies, but they had thrived, eventually becoming naturalised citizens.

Jason talked Yumi through his conversation with Akari.

“What do you think she really wants?” Jason asked. “There’s no way the Japanese Network gives up someone of her skill and power now. Even if she was already on her way here when the grid went down, they should have had her on a plane home immediately. They definitely shouldn’t be offering her up for some open-ended service to a fledging Network family in a different country.”

Yumi had quietly taken in Jason’s explanation and did not respond immediately, sipping delicately at her tea.

“Jason, I have heard it said that you and Miss Hurin are extremely valuable to the Network. Without your usual braggadocio and nonsense, how valuable are you, exactly?”

“Priceless,” Jason said. “So long as we cooperate, we represent knowledge and resources that doesn’t stop paying off. We’ve been offering it on the cheap, too, because protecting the world from monsters is the goal, not a means to profiteer from.”

“There is your answer, then,” Yumi said. “The Asano Network family in Japan want to use our connection, tenuous as it is, to gain advantages from you.”

“Then why come in so aggressively like this?” Jason asked.

“To save face. Their intention is to offer you a service in providing an expert when you need it most. They most likely believe that you will feel obligated to return the favour should their darkest day come to pass. This woman is not here to judge you but as an overture. How she is conducting herself is simply a show of strength, so as for her Asano family to not show weakness in front of ours, maintaining their face.”

“Do you think we should accept that overture?” Jason asked.

“That depends,” Yumi said. “Would she truly be an asset to us?”

“With the state the family is in and what is about to happen? Absolutely. It will be years before we produce our own people even close to her calibre.”

“Then are you willing to reciprocate, when the time comes?”

“I think that’s something I can live with,” Jason said. “Provided there aren’t any unseen dangers lurking below the surface.”

Yumi nodded her approval.

“Yes,” she said. “Make sure that this isn’t an attempt to lure you into some specific troubles.”

“If I find something out, we turn her away, then?”

“No,” Yumi said. “If she’s hiding something then we don’t reject her. If they are dealing with us in bad faith, we close our fist around them.”

“Ah,” Jason said. “We don’t turn her away but demand more.”

“Exactly,” Yumi said. “So long as you are confident of handling whatever mess they want to bring you into, we milk them for all they’re worth.”

Jason nodded.

“I’ll call a meeting of the family to make a final decision, then.”

He moved to jump off the balcony when his grandmother spoke and he paused.

“Jason,” she said. “Did I ever tell you that you were my favourite grandchild?”

“No, Grandmother.”

“Good, because you’re not. You are coming along, though.”

Jason chuckled and leapt over the railing, leaving his smiling grandmother behind.

## Chapter 353

### A Bloke With Vast Cosmic Power

On a busy Sydney street, people backed off as an archway filled with darkness rose up in the middle of the footpath. Some quick thinkers immediately pulled out their phones, so when, after a few moments, two figures emerged from the arch, they were able to capture it. One was wearing dark robes and impossibly draped in a starry void, while the other was looking rather shell shocked.

Jason pushed the hood back from his head as he looked around.

“I didn’t pick very well,” he said. “Nowhere to park. I feel bad about disrupting traffic.”

He walked into the street where the cars were only crawling along, standing in the path of a car so it stopped. The car ahead slowly moved forward to a full car length, at which point Jason took Jeremy’s car from his inventory, which dropped about thirty centimetres to the road with a crunching sound.

“Oops. How’s your suspension? Never mind, just hurry. We’re holding up traffic, here.”

He turned to Jeremy, who was throwing up in the gutter as more people pulled out their phones.

“Get it together, mate,” Jason said. “You’ve got a story to do. Time to get moving, clobber.”

Jason helped Jeremy to his feet and led him into the driver’s seat of his car. While a queasy Jeremy was getting settled, Jason looked at the car he had forced to stop. The driver had opened the door to half get out and was also filming with his phone. Jason wandered over to him.

“Sorry about this mate. You know what it’s like finding a park, yeah.”

“You’re really him.”

“Yep. What’s your name, mate?”

“Sanjit.”

“Nice to meet you, Sanjit. Sorry about Jeremy, there. It’s his first time teleporting and he’s not handling it all that well.”

“How do you do those things?” Sanjit asked.

“I’ve got magic powers, Sanjit. Seems crazy, I know, but the spectrum of what constitutes crazy is about to be drastically realigned. There might be some panic, and people always hoard toilet paper when that happens, so I’d advise stocking up now and beating the rush. Hang on a sec.”

Jason moved up to Jeremy's car, where Jeremy had finally settled into the driver's seat, wide-eyed.

"Time to get a shuffle on, bloke," Jason said through the window.

Jeremy gave a dazed nod, started his car and slowly edged it forward. Jason went back to Sanjit.

"I'm suddenly worried if he's okay to drive," Jason said. "Looks like I've caused bit of a hullabaloo, so I'm going to make myself scarce. It was nice to meet you, Sanjit."

"Uh, you too. You're not what I expected."

Jason chuckled and shook Sanjit's hand.

"I'm just an ordinary bloke with vast cosmic power, trying to get by."

Jason flashed him a grin and then went back to the portal, where people were experimentally poking it with their fingers.

"Excuse I," Jason said as he stepped through it and vanished, the portal descended into the ground, leaving a line of darkness that then too disappeared.

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Returning to Asano Village, Jason was ready for some overdue rest, but first arranged a meeting of the family decision-makers to take place after he woke up. He took the secret tunnel tram from the main residence, out under the water to where his cloud house now sat at the bottom of the sea. The hidden tram system had been brought online with the rest of the village's magic infrastructure.

Farrah's systems were collecting and delivering magic from elsewhere to fuel it, but certain systems had to be supplemented with spirit coins. Fortunately, Jason had no shortage of iron and bronze coins. The handful of systems in the village requiring silver coins remained dormant.

When Jason had emptied the cloud flask into the water, the cloud house had taken the form of a series of domed rooms, connected by short tunnels. The cloud-stuff domes could be shifted between opaque and transparent and Jason preferred to leave it transparent. When the sun was bright and at the right angles, light reached the depths to illuminate the rooms with a constantly shifting blue light that Jason loved. Other times, the cloud house produced downward-directed, glow lamps that floated over the domes to produce a similar effect.

The reaction to Jason's lighting solution was mixed amongst the few who knew of the cloud house's location. Erika found it distracting while Emi shared her uncles love of the cool, shimmering colour.

Dealing with the reporter and Akari had bitten off a couple of hours of what should have been Jason's time to sleep, or his personal equivalent. Under Farrah's direction, he now entered more of a recuperating trance state that enhanced recovery and maintained a subconscious awareness of his surroundings, even passively expanding his senses. It wasn't the same as being fully alert, but he was easily roused by unexpected stimuli.

It was the middle of the day but Jason was far from the only one whose sleeping patterns had been thrown out of whack. All around the world, Network personnel and others were in a mad scramble to prepare for what was coming. Their efforts were impeded by the chaos in the media, of which the news vortex surrounding Jason was only a part.

Key to the problem was mixed messaging. Some countries had media alerts going out where physicists were talking about dimensional invasion to general disbelief. Others were trying to promote readiness in the population while being vague on the nature of the threat. Add in obfuscating media companies across the globe and it was a giant mess that failed to prepare or inform. There was no way that the media obstructionism would last but the clock was running down before monsters started appearing.

The first recorded incident of monsters manifesting happened in Angola, while Jason was resting. Gem-like monstrosities and blighted earth elementals appeared en masse at a diamond mine. By the time footage started reaching the internet, there were incidents on every continent. Even an Antarctic science team recorded monsters from afar as they evacuated their research station.

In most places around the world, the Network's plans to protect the major population centres proved to be effective. Active searching for proto-spaces around populations centres was working and the spaces were being shut down. People were finally heading for the major centres, although that presented logistical issues of accommodation and overcrowding.

The positive part was that the Network partnerships with civilian governments and the military over the last few years had put in place contingencies that were being immediately enacted, with logistical efforts in the safe zones and Network-supported military response to the monster waves.

It was far from enough to handle the events without loss, however. The death toll rapidly climbed as monsters appeared in isolated and rural areas. The populations were smaller than the cities but whole towns were wiped from the face of the Earth before the overextended response teams were able to intervene.

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The day the monsters arrived, the course of human history was irrevocably changed. Those protected in the safe zones watched monster movie footage play across the news as people flooded into the cities. Then, an entirely different kind of movie started playing out.

All over the world, individuals with abilities beyond those of ordinary people started appearing to fight the monsters. These were not the black-fatigued essence users of the Network but colourfully garbed people who appeared in small teams, acting independently of the military and government response.

“Superheroes,” Jason murmured. “That’s genius.”

In the media room of the main residence of Asano Village, Jason was observing a bank of monitors, alongside his closest family members.

“Genius?” Erika asked.

“Think of all the garbled coverage leading up to this,” Jason said. “All the uncertainty and confusion. Now the monsters have come and magic is out there for everyone to see. How are the world governments going to explain this? Are they going to walk people through the complexities of the magical secret societies? The Network, the grid, the secret history? All while people are panicking as monsters emerging from the countryside to slaughter them?”

“People are idiots,” Yumi said. “They always choose a simple lie over a complex truth. Someone wanted this chaos so they can take control of the messaging by giving people a simple answer.”

“Exactly,” Jason said. “The world just went crazy and people aren’t ready to hear about a complex history of secret societies. Superheroes are a paradigm that people can get their heads around. All you need is someone with magic powers, well-defined abdominals and some bright, stretchy fabric.”

“Who are they?” Erika asked.

“The Engineers of Ascension,” Jason said. “The EOA defectors already let the Network know that the media meddling was in preparation to seize control of the narrative with big moves once the monsters started appearing. Now we’re seeing how. What has been the one consistent thing in the news over the last few days?”

“You,” Erika realised.

“Exactly,” Jason said. “They’ve been slowly building up public awareness of me for months, in preparation for today. They were priming the world to accept people with extraordinary powers.”

“How powerful are these superheroes?” Hiro asked.



“We’ve gotten word from a major defector to the American network that the EOA has reached a new threshold in their magical enhancement program. It’s a program to enhance people with magic other than essences and it’s significantly more intrusive. Caustic alchemy baths, surgery to engrave magic runes onto bones. Magic tattoos are the easy part. The result is people who are strong and fast, with a few extra abilities from the magic tattoos I mentioned. These new ones will be silver-rank, and based on what we’ve seen in the past, probably able to boost themselves higher temporarily.”

“They won’t have the experience that Network people have,” Yumi assessed. “They’re going to lose some, but that might work for them. A few heroic sacrifices will go a long way.”

“Most likely,” Jason said. “There’s a reason all those old comic books had the hero looking defeated on the cover.”

“There are teams of these heroes appearing all over the world,” Erika said. “They have this many?”

“I don’t know how many of them will be at this new level of power,” Jason said. “When they were mobilising them in preparation, a lot of the EOA caught wind that something bad was happening and either fought against it or completely defected to the Network. None of these new silver-rank ones, though. Whether through loyalty screening or brainwashing, they knew which side their bread was buttered on and kept their mouths shut.”

“If the EOA had so many defections, it sounds like they messed up,” Ken said.

“No,” Yumi said. “They knew the price and were willing to pay it. They came in ready to make sacrifices in order to grab the initiative.”

“Which is exactly what they’ve done,” Jason said. “Their so-called superheroes are dominating the narrative,” Jason said.

“Piggybacking off of you,” Erika said.

“I’m only a part of it,” Jason said. “Most likely it was opportunism. If I hadn’t come along, it would have made marginal difference to their plan.”

“So, what now?” Erika asked.

“The Network has me on standby right now,” Jason said. “They want me ready to go when silver-rank monsters appear. They also want to establish that the government response can be effective by publicising operations against lower-rank monster swarms, which, in fairness, they are the best at. They don’t want to play into the EOA’s narrative.”

“Does it matter who is telling the story?” Ken asked. “Shouldn’t everyone be out there, doing what they can?”

“No,” Yumi said. “Public reaction is going to be critical in how the long-term response is formed.”

“This is too big for small groups of people to be the centrepiece of the response, even people with powers like Farrah and myself,” Jason said. “That’s the outcome the EOA wants because a broad, military-based response favours the Network. They want to use public opinion to push governments into directing resources their way.”

“This seems like the worst time to be haggling over political points,” Ken said.

“It is,” Jason said, “but the EOA set this into motion, to the point of a revolt forming in their own ranks. Expecting them to act in the public interest now is futile. People are dying and the ones with power are fighting over more power. Some things even an interdimensional monster invasion can’t change.”

“Jason,” Yumi said. “We should have that meeting you scheduled.”

“I don’t think now is exactly the time,” Erika said.

“Yes it is,” Jason said. “We need to discuss a powerful new asset that we may very well need in this new world.”

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After bringing the extended Asano family into the village, along with a handful of others, a village committee had been formed to manage the village’s affairs. It had originally begun as a meeting to decide on a name for the village, ultimately settling on Asano Village. Jason had originally wanted that name before later proposing ‘Jason’s Magic Buff Emporium,’ which was resoundingly overruled.

Under Erika’s direction, the committee subsequently evolved into a formalised management group. Specific roles were introduced and membership underwent some early shifting as people took up or begged-off various responsibilities. Erika controlled food logistics, Ken had land development and Hiro was in charge of magical infrastructure. Jason’s paternal grandmother, Yumi, was in charge of medical. A retired doctor, she managed the administrative aspects while Ian was in charge of operations. There were numerous other roles, held both by Asano family members and by other families also in the village.

The extended Asano family made up the majority but there was a scattering of others as well. This included the family members of Asya, Taika, Greg and Emi’s friend Ruby. Kaito’s best friend and former business partner, Benny, had also brought his family as had Erika’s old producer, Wally. Although many of them were left confused, they had all been strongarmed into heading for the village by their family members in the know.

Asya's mother, Rabia, was the member of the village committee representing the non-Asano families and had been working with her daughter over the last few days to introduce everyone at the village to magic. They were using a heavily accelerated version of the Network's induction program.

Jason's role on the committee was not as a permanent member. Although he had become the de facto patriarch of the nascent Asano clan, he was too busy to be involved in the day-to-day management of the village. His formal role was to break voting deadlocks on the committee and set the direction for the family as a whole. He anticipated more than ample outside input in this regard. Generally, the committee would only call on him as needed.

In the meeting of the village committee Jason had called, he presented Akari Asano's proposition of remaining in Asano Village to the group. Debate went around the table but was dominated by Yumi, who highlighted the lack of downside to such a potentially important gain. Consensus was swiftly reached.

"We'll accept her provisionally for the moment, then," Jason said, right as his phone alarm started going off.

"Grandmother," he said as he checked his phone. "I'll have you deal with Akari for now, if you don't mind. It looks like I have work to do."

## Chapter 354

### A Very Long To-Do List

Strategy meetings to develop effective responses to the monster waves were taking place all over the world. At one such meeting in Sydney, Network and military personnel were discussing the responses still being rolled out, less than a day after the monster waves had begun. Sydney's Director of tactical Operations, Koen Waters, was addressing a meeting being held in a large briefing room.

"In most instances, we anticipate tried and tested methodology to be effective. Existing sweep and clear tactics are the most effective means to rapidly exterminate waves. We foresee three main scenarios where alternative approaches will be more effective. One is when the monsters are clustered together even more than usual and in wide-open spaces. This is a best-case scenario for us because a small number of high-category-operators specialised in area coverage can clear these scenarios. After that, a small team for mop up will be all we need."

"How often can we expect to see this best-case scenario?" Annabeth Tilden asked.

"In the outback, quite frequently," Koen said. "There's an awful lot of flat and empty out there and those are the areas with no dimensional space patrol coverage. This is good news. Australia's geographically-condensed population will see us through this far better than many other nations."

"What's your opinion on the best way to spin this to make us seem in control?"

"Shut up, Other Gordon," Anna said. "This is a strategy meeting, not a political one. What's scenario two, Koen?"

Other Gordon fumed, about to shoot back when he felt the oppression of Koen's aura, leaving him flustered.

"Scenario two is when the landscape is just the opposite. Complex terrain, poor sightlines. It's a bug hunt where the bugs are the size of a bread truck and setting up ambushes."

An Army Major spoke up.

"Military vehicles are much easier to use when not trying to get them through the apertures," he said. "To what degree do you anticipate that compensating?"

"We're rolling out the magically enhanced heavy ordnance program that has been in the works since the category-four incident in England. Major, you should see magically enhanced, vehicle-mounted weapons arriving at bases before the end of the day. Numbers are still limited but we expect them to have an increasing impact as more

enhanced weaponry is mobilised. At the end of the day, though, the best solutions are the small-group special strike teams we've been training up over the last nine months. The ones we're training from scratch aren't ready for deployment, but the retrained teams are already showing positive results."

"You anticipate things being under control, then?" Other Gordon asked.

"Not even close," Koen said. "I'll be discussing the key problems after outlining the scenarios, the third one of which is the problem of power. High-category dimensional spaces contain primarily category-two dimensional entities, along with one or more category threes. Our specialist strike teams have the strength to handle them but not the numbers, while our combined military/Network sweeper teams have the numbers but not the strength."

"Couldn't this scenario be combined with either of the other two?" Anna asked.

"Yes," Koen said. "A scenario one and three combination is harder to deal with than a one, but still manageable. It's combining two and three where things get rough. As we speak, that is the exact situation we're facing at a location in the Blue Mountains. We have multiple strike teams en route, plus Jason Asano."

"This is the man from the news?" the major asked.

"It is," Koen said. "With every analysis we've made of Asano's capabilities, he has turned around and outstripped our projections. Personally, I'm hoping that he never stops, because we do not have what we need to meet the challenges ahead. Too few people, too few resources, too little power."

"I'm assuming this meeting wasn't called just for you to explain how buggered we are," the major said.

"It was not," Koen said. "There is a response that is being tried in some other parts of the world. Africa and Russia are already reporting positive results, only a day into the monster wave. They've been drawing on external support."

"Please tell me you aren't talking about the EOA and their bloody superheroes," Anna said. "League of Heroes my arse."

"No," Koen said.

"I think we need to consider that option," Other Gordon said. "They're getting a lot of positive traction."

"Not an option," Anna said. "Even if we were willing to overlook that they were responsible for this in the first place and then responsible for neutering an effective response in the lead-up, they aren't willing to work with us. Even in situations where we

have arrived together at the same events, they overtly operate alone, with their media teams in tow."

"Their numbers are actually smaller than their media presence would suggest," Koen said. "They do not present the kind of help we need. The Cabal does, and they already have strongholds in the kind of remote, isolated areas where we need increased strategic options."

"So they can claim the credit, too?" Other Gordon asked.

"Actually, just the opposite," Koen said. "The cabal's concern is that their members will get lumped-in with the monsters. If we help keep them hidden until the world has a better handle on everything that's going on, they're offering their secret support."

"Then as the governments representative, I approve," Other Gordon said. "Further, we should be pushing the narrative with our own media teams."

"Absolutely not," Anna said.

"Actually, I agree with Mr Truffett," the major said.

"Who?" Anna asked.

"Me!" Other Gordon roared.

"Oh, right," Anna said. "But no, to media."

"Mrs Tilden," the major said. "Your organisation is used to secrets, but the time for secrets is over. Mr Truffett is not wrong that we are fighting a war on multiple fronts, one of which is public opinion. If we let the Engineers of Ascension control the narrative, that is a beachhead from which they'll launch their invasion. The military has long had protocols for embedding press. We'll use them and show the real face of this conflict."

Anna sighed unhappily but didn't argue back.

"We're willing to discuss it," she said.

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A flight of transport helicopters flew over forested mountains. Jason and Akari Asano were just two of a gaggle of essence users, mostly bronze and silvers from strike teams trained by Farrah. Jason and Akari were in Kaito's helicopter, along with one of the strike teams.

The helicopters were on route to where an advanced team had been setting up a landing zone ahead of the monsters' predicted path. The monsters were spread out over a large area, that they were currently flying over. It would be a lengthy and laborious task to dig them all out.

The silver-rank section leader leaned over to speak to Jason.

"I know you do best working independently. You want us to drop you off here?"

"That'd be great," Jason said.

"We're going to jump out here," he told Akari, then turned to the cockpit door.

"HEY KAI. OPEN THE SIDE DOOR."

The cockpit door slid open. Kaito's flight crew, Asya, Greg and Ruby were in front with him.

"I can hear you," Kaito said. "No need to shout."

"WHAT? I CAN'T HEAR YOU OVER THE HELICOPTER!"

"What are you talking about?" Kaito called back. Switching the helicopter controls over to Greg, Kaito got up and stood in the cockpit doorway.

"I THINK SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH YOUR HELICOPTER," Jason yelled into the near-silent helicopter. "IT'S NOT NORMALLY THIS LOUD."

Kaito frowned at him in confusion.

"I WAS WONDERING ABOUT THAT MYSELF," Greg yelled from the front.

Kaito looked questioningly at the Network strike team, who all put their hands over their ears and shook their heads.

"What the hell is going on?" Kaito asked, looking around at his helicopter with worry. "Is it a magic thing?"

Then saw the confused expression on Akari's face and turned a glare on Jason.

"You're an asshole."

The helicopter was filled with laughter as a grouchy Kaito went back to his seat. Slapping a hand on the console, the side door of the helicopter opened up. Still moving at speed, it filled the space with loud, rushing air.

"GET THE HELL OFF MY HELICOPTER," Kaito yelled back, then the cockpit door slammed closed, cutting the cockpit off from the rushing air.

Jason nodded at the door to Akari and they jumped out. Jason made sure he stayed close to her as they dropped, since the cranky Kaito had not activated the slow-fall power of the helicopter. Despite not having a slow-fall power of her own, Akari had leapt from the helicopter with no hesitation. As they closed on the ground, Jason reached out to grab her with a shadow arm and pulled her into his body, using his cloak to arrest their fall.

Jason dropped them lightly into an area with lighter tree coverage and they both turned their heads to the right. A silver-rank monster had sensed their descent and was making a swift but silent path through the trees.

"Let's see what you can do," Jason said and Akari nodded, moving forward.

Despite being a silver-rank monster, it was smaller than most iron-ranks at half the length of a person. A thin, dark green lizard, it had four long legs with feet almost like hands and a flexible tail that ended in a spine-covered bulb. It was quick, jumpy and did a decent job of hiding its aura. There were other silver-rank monsters nearby and it seemed to have tried to use their auras to mask its own. Once it was close, however, they were able to differentiate it.

Jason faded into the shadows as the creature sprung to the attack, engaging Akari in a battle of mobility, speed and quick defences. Physically weak for such a powerful monster, it boasted a suite of special attack forms instead. It shot venomous spines that rapidly regrew on the bulb tail and spat clouds of poison gas that lingered, complicating the environment. It could also spit out a trio of barbed tongues to make flexible, piercing attacks.

Akari was a swordmaster, very much in the vein Jason was familiar with from the other world. She had the ubiquitous combination amongst such essence users of the Sword and Adept essences, in her case matching it with the Magic essence to produce the Master confluence. Forgoing other common choices like the Swift or Foot essences denied her the selection of mobility powers they offered but her adept essence had clearly enhanced her agility. She sprang around the trees almost as easily as the lizard, both of them treating the trees like solid ground and barely putting a foot to soil.

The advantage of her magic essence was that it expanded her repertoire in the face of more exotic abilities. Like other swordmasters, she met attack with attack, her Magic essence giving her more interesting options. It also provided her with a blinking teleport, compensating for the lack of a dedicated mobility essence.

Jason was familiar with the power, which was better in a close-range fight than the teleport Humphrey had from his own magic essence. Akari's ability did not offer long-range travel at higher ranks. Instead, it became more and more effective as a combat ability than Humphrey's or Jason's teleports. Akari left behind after-images that exploded with force and appeared phasing through the lizard, inflicting damage as she passed through it in a briefly incorporeal state.

Akari's sword sliced through the clouds of poison, which split with the blade's passage and dissolved into nothing. Clusters of spine projectiles were deflected by force waves from her swinging sword. The tongues only made one attempt to stab at her, which she nimbly dodged past before bringing her sword down on them. It didn't sever the silver-rank flesh but it did leave the tongues cut and bloody. The lizard snapped them back into its mouth and didn't send them out again.



The silver rank monster was trickier than most, but at the trade-off of much less fortitude. Its silver-rank body was still bizarrely tough for its size but it couldn't take the punishment of a larger monster and Akari eventually landed enough clean hits to take it down.

Akari was a classic swordmaster, the type that was very popular on Adventure Society teams. If they had the ability that matched their high-skill power sets, and Akari certainly did with hers, then their balance of strength and endurance were always welcome. She couldn't frontload damage like Farrah or Humphrey or have the endurance of Jason, but she occupied an efficient middle ground of power and longevity.

"You'd do very well in the other world," Jason told her and she gave him an inquisitive look.

"You really went to a whole other reality?"

"Yep," he said with a sad smile. "I miss my friends but I don't know when I'll get back to them. I have responsibilities here."

"You're going back?"

"Someday."

"How?"

"Figuring that out is on a very long to-do list, and not at the top. Ready to loot your first monster?"

Akari was connected to Jason through his party interface. With Kaito on site, it was not needed to provide comms for the response team, so it was just the two of them. Since they weren't in a proto-space, the lack of magic made the range of Jason's power too small anyway, for effective communication or for looting.

Akari touched the monster and the loot prompt appeared in front of her.

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➤ [Would you like to loot \[Toxic Hopper Lizard\]?](#)

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"Yes," she accepted and then she grimaced at a face full of rainbow smoke, followed by a huge sack of coins landing on her head, staggering her. They were closely followed by a pair of green, lizard skin boots.

"The trick is to move away before activating the loot power," Jason told her. "Also, if you don't have a storage power, be sure to dodge."

"You could have told me those things beforehand," Akari said, leaning against a tree.

"Is that some humanity poking out from that taciturn exterior? 'Look at me, I'm a very stern clanswoman with a sword. I'm very good at stabbing.'"

“I am very good at stabbing,” Akari said. “You would do well to remember.”

Jason let out a chuckle.

“You don’t seem too sloppy, so let’s split up a little. I’ll keep you in loot range; we won’t run out of monsters.”

“I don’t have anything to keep things taken from monsters in.”

“No worries,” Jason said, tossing her an empty dimensional bag.

“What’s this?” she asked picking it up.

“Dimensional bag,” he said. “Bigger on the inside.”

She held it up in front of her, looking at it with a sceptical expression.

“You’re telling me that this thing is a bag of holding?” she asked and Jason narrowed his eyes at her.

“Do you play Dungeons & Dragons?” he asked.

Her face froze for an instant before she schooled it back into a mask.

“No.”

## Chapter 355

### Another Step Forward

Akari watched in horror as the leeches crawled off the dried-out remains of what had been, a short while ago, a very intimidating monster. The leeches formed a pile from which a bloody rag shot out to wrap around Jason's hand. The pile then rapidly melted into blood that flowed up and through the rag to finally seep into Jason's skin and disappear.

"Colin can't pop in and out as easily as my other familiars," Jason said. "It's likely as not on account of him being physical, as opposed to incorporeal. When he does come out, though, everybody sure does know about it. Am I talking like a cowboy? It feels like I'm talking like a cowboy. A magic cowboy. That's pretty cool. I bet you could do a great quick-draw combo. On the cheap, too. Gun and swift essences, obviously, but what about the last one? Eye or hand would both work, I reckon. What do you think?"

"Are you an insane person?"

"Probably. This whole ninja warlock thing doesn't seem very plausible."

"We just watched a leech monster devour a two-headed dinosaur."

"That doesn't seem very plausible either," Jason acknowledged. "Good point."

"We just saw that," she said, pointing at the huge ruined monster, "and you're casually discussing some hypothetical essence combination?"

"Lady, you're silver rank. Category three, whatever. Please tell me they didn't just pump you full of monster cores without ever putting you in front of an actual monster?"

"Of course not. I'm just not used to someone who fights like you. You're worse than the dimensional entities."

"Well, that's downright rude, Ma'am."

"Stop talking like a cowboy."

"Counter argument," Jason said in an increasingly sketchy American accent. "What if I double down and get a big hat?"

"What is wrong with you?"

"It took the Network a while to figure that one out. It turns out that once you pass a certain threshold of handsomeness, it starts affecting the ambient magic."

"You are the most aggravating person I have ever met."

"You're not even top three for me. At least you've calmed down some."

"You think I'm calm?" she asked incredulously.

“Perhaps calm isn’t the right term. At ease, maybe. At least you’ve stopped thinking about the fact that every other time you’ve gone on a monster hunt, there were a lot fewer monsters around you and a lot more allies.”

“You’re trying to be supportive? This is the way you do that?”

“You’re not the type to respond to regular sympathy, especially not from a man famous for his lack of sincerity. You’re not my first tsundere.”

“I am not... are you looking to get buried in the forest, never to return?”

“Oh, you can bury me in the forest but I wouldn’t be so confident on the never-to-return part. Resurrection is kind of my thing.”

“You’re saying you can’t be killed?”

“Oh, I can be killed just fine,” Jason said. “It does make me a little cranky, though, so I’d advise against it. Now, I’d love to keep on chatting away, but we do have to deal with the monsters bearing down on us right now.”

“What?”

“You haven’t sensed them yet?”

Akari concentrated on extended her senses, detecting a swarm of weak but multitudinous auras coming their way. She recognised them as wisps from their aura as they were a creature she had encountered in the past. They normally appeared in one of two circumstances: either in swarms or as bait, luring victims into ambushes by more dangerous monsters.

Individually, wisps were feeble and frail creatures whose only attack was a mana drain. Their level of threat was based on the combination of their rank and numbers, as well as how well-equipped their would-be victims were to fight incorporeal entities. Any form of magic attack could affect incorporeal creatures to some degree, but only specialised attacks were truly effective.

Akari had attacks effective against such creatures and the approaching auras were universally bronze-rank. This meant they posed only a limited threat to her, even in the massive numbers she could sense. Her concern was Jason, who was no higher rank than the monsters. He was also known, from her family’s investigations, to specialise in fleshly enemies with few area attacks.

She shifted a tense gaze from the direction of the approaching swarm to glance at Jason, going wide-eyed as she spotted him standing with a sandwich in one hand and what looked like iced tea in the other.

“What are you doing?” she asked and he looked down at his hands in confusion.

“Do you not know how sandwiches work? How sheltered was your upbringing? Were you raised in some isolated mountain fortress? Was there a hot springs episode?”

“I am not an anime character,” she said through gritted teeth.

Jason flashed her an impish grin.

“Boys, why don’t you go out and save the nice lady the trouble?” he asked. Gordon and a handful of Shade’s bodies emerged and dashed off into the trees. Akari tracked them by their auras and magical emanations as they clashed with the approaching swarm. Gordon’s beam attacks vaporized the creatures as they repeatedly passed through the swarm, while the Shades eradicated every one he encountered with a touch. His ability to mana drain outstripped theirs easily and it turned out that they were highly susceptible to their own form of attack. As each was drained in an instant, they dissolved into barely perceptible motes of dust.

Akari sensed the pair of familiars methodically eliminate the wisps like they were painting over an exposed wall until there was nothing left to sense. She and Jason moved to the location of the startlingly brief battle as Jason’s familiars returned to him.

“Good job, blokes,” Jason said as the familiars disappeared back into him. Still eating his snack, a pair of shadow arms emerged from his cloak to trail their fingers through the dust as he walked over the battle site.

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➤ [Would you like to loot \[Greater Forest Wisp\]?](#)

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He left the area before triggering the looting so the rainbow smoke wouldn’t impair the enjoyment of his sandwich. Once he did, the colourful mist rose up and out from the tree canopy over quite a large area.

“I reckon we swing east, where those things came from next,” he asked. “I suspect we’ve pretty much cleared out this direction. What do you think?”

\*\*\*

After regrouping with the main Network force, Jason sent most of Shade’s bodies out to sweep the region for monsters. The Network teams were regrouping and switching to a mop-up protocol as they hunted down any straggling monsters. They were easy to miss in the sprawling forest region and he coordinated with other essence users deploying their own scouting abilities, like Kaito and his drones.

The base camp was being packed up, although the tactical teams remained on standby in case they needed to move rapidly if the scouts found something unexpected. Jason sat in a quiet corner, meditating to consolidate the gains of his latest experiences.

Akari joined him in meditation, hers differing in that she had laid out a mat with a ritual circle stitched into it and was holding a monster core in her hands. After joining up with the Network team, her reserve that Jason had cracked open went back in place, although she was not quite as cool with him. That was not the same as friendly, though, as she remained wary of the strange man who mixed absurdity, power and horror in equal measure.

Individual essence abilities each felt different as they ranked up. As another of Jason's crossed the threshold to silver, he felt an icy cold within the depths of his soul, although it did not offer pain or discomfort. It was a part of him, and a part he felt warmly about, despite the chilly sensation.

- 
- Ability [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark) has reached Bronze 9 (100%).
  - Ability [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark) has reached Silver 0 (00%).
  - Ability [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark) has gained a new effect.

#### Ability: [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark)

- Familiar (ritual, summon).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Summon a [Shadow of the Reaper] to serve as a familiar.
- Effect (bronze): Summoned familiar has bronze-rank vessels with additional abilities.
- Effect (silver): Summoned familiar has silver-rank vessels with additional abilities.
- Ability [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached silver rank.

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Akari sensed the shift in Jason's magical state, even catching a glimpse of his normally hidden and rather intimidating aura.

"What ability was it?" Akari asked.

"One of my familiar summons, Shade," Jason said. "I'll need to resummon him before he can use his new strength. I've been trading resources in preparation for resummoning all my familiars ever since I first started working with the Network."

"Is it resource-intensive?" she asked. "I've known very few essence users with familiars, most of them ritualists in support teams."

Jason nodding, knowing that was typical across the Network.

“I have most of what I need,” he said. “Silver-rank materials are still somewhat thin on the ground, though and the materials for Gordon are proving especially tricky.”

“Which one is Gordon?”

“The one who looks like he has the God’s Eye Nebula inside him.”

“And he’s called Gordon.”

“He doesn’t have to let what he is define him,” Jason said. “Unfortunately, it does define how to summon his silver-rank vessel. I’m pretty sure the Americans and the Chinese have what I need but I’m not on great terms with either of them. I kind of hauled off on Americans when they tried to recruit me.”

“Why?”

“I made some implications about their policies as a nation.”

“You think your government would be any better if they had America’s global power?”

“No,” Jason said, like a child admitting he hadn’t made his bed.

“What about the Chinese?”

“There have been allegations that I may have filmed some things while I was passing through their country. Footage that possibly might have mysteriously found its way to the international press.”

“What kind of things?”

“Camps, mostly. Not the toasted marshmallow kind. You might have seen some of it on the news a few months back.”

“Is there anyone who doesn’t immediately dislike you?”

“What are you talking about? People love me.”

\*\*\*

“I’m still not sold on this idea,” Jason said. He was back in Asano Village, walking alongside Farrah. He had placed the cloud house back in its flask and set it up in a grassy field just outside the village for a special event, at Farrah’s insistence. He had set it up in the form of a single hall, with an open space and amphitheatre seating.

The vortex manipulator was sucking ambient magic in through the building’s roof, disrupting the village’s magic but it was a temporary necessity. Conducting a silver-rank ritual would otherwise require heavily charged mana lamps.

As they left the village thoroughfare, Jason and Farrah were far from the only ones walking over the grass toward the hall. Members of the Asano family and other village residents were collectively moving across the field to head inside. Many of them were pointing out Jason to one another since he was now a celebrity who many of them had barely met.

“Most of these people haven’t seen some proper magic,” Farrah said. “They’ve seen magical effects on the news and here in the village, but now they can see a proper ritualist at work.”

“I’m a proper ritualist?” Jason asked.

“You’re adequate.”

Jason grinned at Farrah’s disapproving expression, knowing how demanding Farrah’s standards as an instructor could be. Her adequate was high praise.

“It means a lot coming from you,” he said. “Thank you.”

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

“I’m not sure that resummoning Shade is the ritual to introduce them with, though.”

“It’ll be fine,” Farrah said. “It can’t be as bad as with Colin, right? You’re not going to bleed out your butt hole and pass out, right?”

“I didn’t bleed out my butt hole.”

“You bled out of everywhere. We thought you might be dead.”

“It went a lot better when I resummoned him at bronze-rank.”

“You know, having a familiar of higher rank than you can be strenuous at higher ranks,” Farrah said. “It’s one of those awkward aspects of being close to a rank-up. You should be fine, given your soul strength, though. Maybe not when you’re pushing up against diamond, I don’t know, but that will be a good problem to have.”

“Yes it will,” Jason agreed.

They went into the hall where people were being organised into the seating. Managing the villagers was the village committee role of Jason’s Nanna, who was very lively after months of recovery from her Alzheimer’s. She had a small staff who were making sure people found places to sit without contention.

The villagers watched as Jason and Farrah set up the ritual circle on the stone floor the cloud house had replicated for the hall, tracing out lines with chalk. It was a large and complex ritual circle with silver spirit coins and silver-rank dark quintessence gems set out in many small piles.

“You know you can get ritual bowls to hold those things,” Farrah said. “Kind of like those little bowls Greg uses for board game bits, except magic and expensive.”

“I don’t think those can be sourced locally,” Jason said.

“Probably not,” Farrah acknowledged.

“Okay, I think we’re good,” Jason said as they completed adjustments to the ritual diagram. Farrah moved over to Erika, who took over crowd control, telling everyone to settle down as Farrah subtly quieted the group with her aura.



“What you’re about to witness is magic,” Erika announced. “Proper, wizards and spell-book magic. You are all going to watch in silence, or There Will Be Repercussions.”

Farrah emphasised Erika’s words with a slight aura surge and the audience felt like gravity was pushing them into their seats. Farrah and Erika took their own seats at the front, next to Emi, leaving Jason alone in the middle of the hall with the ritual circle, in total silence.

He started chanting, his intonations cold as the merciless void of space. As he chanted, the ambient magic was stirred up to the point that even normal people could feel it, but Jason’s aura was projecting out, leaving them frozen in place.

*“I call to the realm beyond cold and darkness, where death has no meaning for life has no place. Let mine be the dark beyond darkness, falling on the final road to the end of all things. Let mine be the shadow of death.”*

The shift in the ambient magic started to affect physical reality as the hall grew dim. With the final word of the chant, the hall was plunged into darkness yet not a sound disrupted the ritual, the onlookers still arrested by Jason’s aura. A point of cool celestial starlight appeared on the floor and started slowly tracing out the magic diagram until the ritual circle was shedding dim light throughout the hall.

In the darkness between the lines, the piles of coins and quintessence sank into the floor like they were melting. Jason’s aura faded, only for a new one to take its place, spreading out from the ritual circle. It had the feel of an infinite void, inexorably waiting for all things to enter, patient with the certainty that they inevitably would.

A dark figure rose up from the centre of the circle. Then another and another, shadowy forms barely visible in the light of the glowing circle at their feet. The only truly discernible features the dark figures had was that they seemed to be wearing cloaks, within the hoods of which were bright, silver eyes.

Jason could see much more clearly than the others and was startled by what he saw. Not only were the eyes mirrors of his own but Shade’s new bodies kept coming and coming. At bronze rank, Shade had seven bodies and Jason had expected around a dozen or maybe fifteen at silver. New bodies kept rising up to crowd the circle until thirty-one Shades were standing in the room.

With each new body, Shade’s intimidating aura grew stronger, until the last body finally appeared and it vanished, like a magic trick. The light returned to the hall, the ambient cloud house lighting that was familiar at least to Jason and his closest companions. The dark bodies rushed forward in a wave, vanishing into Jason’s shadow until only one remained, standing in front of him.

“Another step forward,” Jason said.

“Yet many are to come,” Shade answered. “This world is large and not the only one demanding your attention. And beyond them lies the infinite.”

“That’s a little above my rank, right now,” Jason said.

“Since when did that ever stop you?” Shade asked.

## Chapter 356

### Tactical Flexibility

The residents of Asano Village spilled out of the hall into the blessed sunshine, freed from Jason's domineering aura and the unnatural darkness they had been plunged into. Even though the darkness had faded, reaching sunlight coming down from open sky still felt like an escape.

Once outside, many made a beeline for the village, putting the amazing but unnerving demonstration of magic behind them. Others stopped to watch as Jason returned the solid building they had just been occupying to a flask, like putting a genie back into a bottle. Jason's other close friends and family had seen it before and had already paused their other activities longer than they should, thus were rushing back to resume them. The exceptions were Farrah and Emi, who stood by Jason as the building slowly dissolved into cloud-stuff that snaked its way into the bottle.

"You got the recordings for Terrance alright?" Jason asked.

"I haven't checked them but it should be fine," Farrah said. "Once I get back to Sydney I'll give them to him. You really need to rank up that portal ability, Jason."

"One power at a time," Jason said. "I'm going to put Shade through his paces, now that he's ranked up. You're higher-rank than me now, Shade, so I'm anticipating you doing most of the work while I slack off."

"Miss Emi," Shade said. "If you find yourself in need of a shadow-based familiar once you obtain essences, I think you and I should talk."

"Traitor!" Jason exclaimed.

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After returning the cloud house to its hidden location underwater, Jason wanted to go out and explore Shade's expanded limits and capabilities. In the village thoroughfare, Shade took the form of a motorcycle which Jason climbed on and they took off.

The front gate at the edge of the property was around three kilometres from the village proper and there was a large crowd on the other side as Jason pulled to a stop. On either side of the road, tents and campers had been clustered.

Once the location of the Asano compound had been released in the press, panicked people had come seeking the Starlight Rider's protection rather than head for the designated safe zones. Mixed in were some with fringe opinions about him that Jason had no interest in. As he pulled up behind the gate he spotted signs and placards welcoming

the messenger of God, decrying the Antichrist and an oddly large number mentioning chemtrails.

“Has Kaito been leaving condensation trails with his helicopter?”

“No,” Shade said.

“What’s the chemtrail thing about, then?”

“I don’t know,” Shade said. “Something I have learned in my very long life is that not all knowledge is worth possessing.”

“A font of wisdom, as ever, Shade.”

Aside from the would-be refugees and the loons, there was a contingent of press, present, in what Jason suspected to be one of the least coveted jobs in the current media landscape. He looked over at the sketchy portable toilets that someone was charging for the use of and confirmed that suspicion on the spot.

Numerous people had attempted to bypass what seemed like the simple security of a chain-link fence, even if it was a rather odd one. What they discovered was that anyone who attempted to climb over it passed unconscious, courtesy of the mana-draining field Farrah and Hiro had built into it.

In one instance, a press helicopter had attempted a flyover of the property, only for the pilot and passengers to wake up in a different state with no helicopter, no recording equipment and no idea what happened.

Those who tried to cut their way through the fence suffered considerably worse, discovering that the fence wasn’t so much electrified as it shot lightning bolts.

The village largely ignored the people gathered outside so long as they adhered to two rules: leave a space around the security room and keep the road clear. This second rule was currently being broken by the press gathering in front of the gate to shout over one another, firing questions at Jason.

“You’re obstructing a public thoroughfare,” Jason said. His voice was soft yet somehow carried across the whole group, which fell into silence as Jason’s aura descended. He could see frantic eyes light up with the desire to mob rush the gate as it started to slide open but Jason continued to use fine aura control to not just keep them in place but have them scramble back off the road.

Before he set off, Jason looked around the reporters for the one that was holding up the best against his suppression. He relaxed the strength of his aura against that one person to almost nothing and the man fought through the fear to yell out a question.

“You haven’t allowed press into the compound since before the dimensional invasion began. What are you hiding?”

Jason turned, his silver eyes falling unerringly on the man despite his position at the back of the pack. Then he grinned.

“What I’m hiding is my family. I don’t know if you’ve heard, but there are monsters about.”

Without waiting for a response, Jason’s bike shot off like a rocket.

\*\*\*

“...but there are monsters about.”

Anna muted the television on the wall of her office with a groan.

“Why does he keep running into the press?” she complained. “He has magical stealth powers.”

“Because I asked him to,” Terrance said.

“You did this?”

“Of course I did,” Terrance said. “The EOA went to the trouble of legitimising him, after all. We’ve been doing the faceless government response thing and I get it: we want to show everyone that there’s a system in place and that society isn’t crumbling around us. Yet. But the EOA has been kicking us up and down the street with the good-looking superhero act and we need a human face for people to get behind.”

With the Network transitioning their Media Interdiction department into the more traditional Media Relations department, the new Director of Media Relations was Terrence.

“Publicity is a secondary concern at this point.”

“Right up until it isn’t,” Terrance said. “Did you know the superheroes are claiming credit for the grid?”

“They’re admitting to taking it down?”

“NO, they’re claiming that they were secretly keeping away the monsters until terrorists took down their early warning system.”

“They’re claiming to be us?”

“Anna, if they convince the public that they’re us, it’s only a matter of time before governments start switching their support from us to the EOA.”

“That’s insane.”

“I don’t think they care. They know that we’re busy protecting the world with a massive outlay of people and resources. They’re busy taking credit for it using a few flashy idiots in spandex with dedicated media crews.”

“They’re not actually wearing spandex, are they?”

“No, their costume design is actually pretty fabulous,” Terrance conceded.

"You do realise," Anna said, "that if you go with Asano, your human face of the Network is not actually human."

"He's from a small town, Sweetie, not space."

"Never mind. He's not actually Network, either."

"Look," Terrance said. "Asano is charismatic, great at handling the press and he has this light and dark thing that plays amazingly with most of our test demographics."

"You've done focus groups?"

"Of course we have. He tests low with older people, which is partly just racism and partly a religious-based backlash to everything going on. That's actually a positive, though, because it shows that he's the face of magic, not the EOA's knock-off Justice League. He does great with the other demos, though because he has these dichotomies that balance each other out across the board. The lefties love supporting him because he's not white and it makes them feel good about themselves. The conservatives are on board because of the footage we've leaked of him riding around the outback on a motorcycle, tearing through monsters."

"You've been releasing our combat footage?"

"Don't worry about that. He's got that easy-going larrikin thing that makes him relatable, but he's also shrouded in mystery. His powers are dark, dangerous, which brings in the edgelords but he's also running around healing people like emo Jesus. Actually, Farrah should have some footage for me that will let us show off that dark power thing a little more."

"You want to play up the dark powers when people are scared of monsters running around?"

"People need to know that someone is going to save them right now. The EOA has been selling this superhero narrative and people are eating it up, so we have to sell it better. They've been showing off a bunch of second-rate supermen but they've forgotten that people like Batman more. Asano is an Australian, multicultural, yobbo Bruce Wayne."

"And you can sell this? I've met the man and he's mostly pushy and weird."

"You think I picked him on a whim?" Terrance said, "I'm a professional, Anna. I watched every bit of footage we have on him, went over action reports and interviewed anyone I could find who has dealt with him. Then I interviewed him."

"And?"

"He becomes what he needs to get what he wants. He might seem off-kilter to you, but that's because he wants you off-kilter. With regular people, he's relaxed and charming."

When he needs to be in control, he's fierce and domineering. He's confident, he's handsome and he's exactly what we need right now."

"Handsome," Anna groaned, slapping a hand over her eyes.

"Oh, he's a tasty treat, alright. I mean, those eyes; it's like he's hunting you. Gives me the shivers."

"Oh no."

"The sexy shivers."

"Terrance," Anna said disapprovingly.

"And have you seen his brother? We should get some publicity shots of them together. Maybe after spraying them with water."

"Terry..."

"I'd be the creamy filling in that sandwich any day. Plate me, I'm done."

"Do I have to call HR again?"

"Don't be such a prude, sis. It's just you and me."

"Do you want me to tell Mum how you've been acting at work?"

"Oh, you wouldn't."

"I damn well would," Anna said.

"You know, Anna, she keeps complaining that you're never home for dinner. She likes having everyone together but you're always here."

"Yes, well sometimes I have work late. It's the monster apocalypse."

"You know the nomenclature guidelines don't like that term," Terrance said.

"I will not be lectured on appropriate language in the workplace by you."

\*\*\*

Jason could have easily tested Shade's abilities in Asano Village but a motorcycle ride in the warm sun of late summer was a balm after the intensity that followed the grid's collapse. Jason had spent almost every waking moment patrolling for proto-spaces or flying off to help put down monster waves. He knew that he would inevitably be called up again, but for the moment he enjoyed the simple pleasure of the wind on his face.

Jason took advantage of the respite, riding to a little coastal town that made Casselton Beach look big. Normally there would be a few tourists and locals enjoying the white sand and clear water but the town had been evacuated. No small number of them were now in tents in front of Asano Village's main gate.

He stopped riding at the edge of town and started walking down the only street. The only noise was the sound of the ocean and the quiet emptiness in the middle of a bright, sunny day was eerie.

“My world is never going back to the way it was, is it?” Jason asked.

“No,” Shade said, a body emerging to glide along the ground next to Jason. “But you will have to become far stronger if you want to hold those responsible to account.”

“Assuming I ever reach that kind of level, who will I have become? Sometimes I look at the way I conduct myself and feel like I’ve become a caricature of myself.”

“Magic pushes people to extremes,” Shade said. “Power gives people the chance to be what they truly desire. It strips away the layers they place between their deepest selves and their behaviour.”

“I’m not sure I like what that says about me.”

“You could have done far worse, Mr Asano. The perfectly righteous man is a myth. I’ve encountered people on myriad worlds and beyond the truly good ones are those doing their best, in spite of their flaws. I’ve seen gods consumed in pettiness and rank villains become vaunted messiahs. What I have never seen is a perfect person, from base mortal to great astral being.”

“You’re saying to stop worrying about what I’ve done in the past and focus on doing my best in the future.”

“I am. I have high hopes for you, Mr Asano.”

“But higher hopes for my niece.”

“If a better ship comes along, it’s only natural to board it.”

“It’s talk like that that makes me like Colin and Gordon more than you.”

They made their way down to the beach.

“It’s not a new ability,” Jason said, “but what kind of vehicles do you think you can manage with all those extra bodies?”

“The existing rank restrictions on the forms I can take remain,” Shade said. “The ability that lets me use such forms is yours, not mine, so flight and submarine forms will still take more bodies to achieve lesser effects.”

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “What kind of limits can you hit with your new body count?”

“I can probably manage a small private plane by employing almost all of my vessels, although that would be forcibly using my higher-rank to push the limits of your lower-rank ability. The energy I would consume in doing so would make the spirit coin cost of that extremely prohibitive until you rank up.”

“So you’re really waiting on me, then. I don’t suppose you could manage a giant rotary cannon if we pulled up a tank or something?”



“We’ve been over this, Mr Asano. I can mimic attack forms that are a permanent part of the structure, but not special and projectile attacks. I can create claws or a battering ram but not poison breath, shooting spines or projectile weaponry.”

“I thought maybe with the rank up...”

“You want to replicate your brother’s entire power set with one racial gift, yes. Give it up, Mr Asano.”

“It’s my ability. Maybe when I rank up.”

“Perhaps we should move on to an ability I actually do possess?”

“Fine.”

Shade’s new plethora of shadow bodies meant that Jason could expand the people he kept a Shade in the shadow of. He could now include his father, his sister’s entire family and Farrah without losing too many bodies for practical purposes.

As for actual new abilities, Shade had gained two on reaching silver rank. One was that any of his shadow bodies could teleport to any of his other bodies. This meant that Jason could deploy Shades all over and call them back at need, or send a group of them to help a family member should they run into trouble.

The range of this ability was equivalent to a portal ability of one rank below Shade’s vessel. This meant that at the baseline of silver-rank, the range was the same as Jason’s portal had been when it first reached bronze, which was roughly forty kilometres.

Shade’s other new ability had the same range limitation. Within that range, Shade was able to act as a medium for any of Jason’s non-combat abilities. This meant that he could shadow jump to one of Shade’s bodies, ignoring the usual requirement of the target shadow needing to be nearby. This massively expanded his non-portal teleportation range, which could be critical when he ran into the cooldown of the portal.

During the motorcycle ride, Shade had left a shadow body behind every few kilometres. Jason stepped into the Shade next to him and appeared next to the most recent body left behind. He stepped back immediately and proceeded to hop from body to body until he arrived back in Asano village.

“No portal arch, no cooldown,” Jason said. “I can’t bring people along, it ups the mana consumption and the range isn’t ideal, but still, this is awesome.”

“It does offer additional tactical flexibility,” Shade said. “I will be able to go to areas you cannot see directly and provide you with shadow jumping options. It is an adequate use of the power.”

“Calm down, mate. Don’t get too excitable.”

Jason stepped back into Shade, jumping back to the beach and began testing other abilities. Another aspect of using shadow bodies as a medium for his powers was that Jason could use his non-combat abilities from Shade as if they were his own body, once again within the same range limit.

His perception power worked, so when he shared the senses of one of Shade's bodies he had his full perceptual range. His Hand of the Reaper ability did not, as the afflictions it could apply apparently marked it as a combat ability.

The most unexpected result was when he manifested his cloak over Shade, for the simple reason that he was able to do so even while having one conjured on himself. To date, he could only have one cloak because he had to occupy it. With Shade's new capability, that was no longer a hard limit.

He had most of Shades bodies teleport to him, aside from the ones attached to family members, then conjured cloaks on all of them. The mana cost of conjuring his cloak was only moderate but having conjured twenty-seven in short order had carved off a serious chunk of his mana.

"Strewth," he croaked, with a slight headache from dumping so much mana in an instant. It had been even more than an extreme mana cost spell, like summoning Shade in the first place cost him. Fortunately, he was near the peak of bronze and his mana pool was rich, courtesy of his high spirit attribute.

Once his cloak ranked up, it would cost a moderate amount of mana for a silver-ranker, which would make it more prohibitive until he had a silver-ranker's mana pool. It was one of the difficulties of being on the cusp of ranking up.

Jason popped a bronze-rank spirit coin in his mouth to help him recover.

"I think I'll go home for a rest," he said, right as his phone started beeping an alarm.

"Oh, bloody hell."

## Chapter 357

### Broken

One of the best-known locations in the Australian outback, Broken Hill was a carefully chosen target. Its rich history and iconic desert landscapes had woven it into the fabric of Australia's soul. It was also one of the centres to which isolated people from across that region of the outback had been gathered, exploding the population from less than twenty thousand to almost thirty-five thousand.

The Network presence was minimal, with only a single tactical section to protect the support team whose core duty was to check for dimensional incursions. With resources stretched thin, only when a dimensional space was detected would a substantive force be brought in.

The personnel in charge of organising the massive influx of people were regular civil servants, military logistics specialists and no small number of volunteers. There were builders knocking up prefab domiciles and companies donating materials, tools and machinery. Like in other safe zones being set up around the world, people were coming out to show how many were willing to step up and help one another.

Major population centres around the world were being turned into military green zones, while the most rural areas were being abandoned. Broken Hill fell somewhere in the middle, having been placed under Network protection but with only a fraction of the resources allocated to a major city.

The Network had become known to the public as the Global Defense Network in the weeks since the monster waves began, the terrorist readiness exercises claimed as preparation for the worst-case scenario now being faced. The sympathetic portion of the media referred to the 'supernatural task forces' the GDN fielded as the government response to an unimaginable threat. Their practicality and professionalism were intended to instil confidence but this was continually being upstaged by the flashy antics and expert media manipulation of the EOA's League of Heroes.

The EOA's agenda of positioning themselves as a top power player that matched or even eclipsed the Network was built around taking a leading position in responding to the monster waves. This involved a two-pronged attack of raising themselves up as they simultaneously tore the Network down.

The EOA's goal wasn't to convince the governments of the world that they were better than the Network. The governments knew full well that the Network's power, resources and reach easily outstripped the EOA. The EOA's goal was to swing public

sentiment so ferociously in their direction that the governments were forced to give the EOA a seat at the table, shifting support, resources and influence away from the Network.

Various targets around the globe were selected to further this purpose and Broken Hill fit their criteria perfectly. It was under Network protection, but with minimal Network presence. They had a support team to scan for proto-spaces and a nine-person tactical section to protect them. Otherwise, Broken Hill was staffed by regular military, civil servants and volunteers.

In addition, Broken Hill was geographically isolated in a very large nation where the Network had limited magical transport options. These factors tallied up to make Broken Hill a soft target for the EOA's plan. If the Network suffered a catastrophic failure in one of their supposed safe zones, only for the League of Heroes to step in, it would be a major blow to the Network. If it repeatedly happened worldwide, it went from a major blow to a crippling one.

While the network had been scrambling to save as many people as possible, the EOA had been choosing their targets and carefully infiltrating them. The EOA's 'League of Heroes' was the right hand distracting the audience, their clandestine operations were the left hand performing the trick. The volunteer staff and even the military personnel stationed at Broken Hill had no shortage of EOA plants.

The infiltrators in Broken Hill were meticulous and patient. The government and Network personnel were more wary of panic amongst the population than sabotage, leaving the EOA's people safely undetected. Not even Jason, briefly passing through, had picked out their duplicitous emotions amongst the tens of thousands in the overstuffed town.

The EOA played their roles well, not jumping at the first proto-space detected in the region. Earnest volunteers, they worked as hard as anyone to support the team that arrived to intercept the monster wave. It even included the famous Starlight Rider, tearing across the desert on a motorcycle, his cloak of stars flying behind him.

They would only get a single shot and the EOA waited for the right proto-space, lucking out perfectly when one appeared right on top of Broken Hill itself. It was then that the EOA struck. Communications were taken over and the tactical section ambushed and eliminated, as was any military personnel not already suborned. Black-clad paramilitary soldiers swept in from the desert on trucks to contain the town, claiming to be government reinforcements.

The civil and civilian camp workers were not taken in by the obvious lie but were forced to go along by the lack of outside contact and large number of armed soldiers. They

made various attempts to get word out but every phone line was cut and every signal jammed.

In the general chaos of the monster waves, it took a day before the Network realised that Broken Hill had become unreachable. They sent an emergency investigation team who managed to scout out the situation and get word back that someone had taken control of Broken Hill, but it was already too late. The EOA had stalled long enough for the proto-space to start disgorging monsters onto the town in flashes of rainbow light.

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Kaito's helicopter flew directly inland at a pace no ordinary helicopter could match. Other teams were approaching Broken Hill from Adelaide, which was closer than Sydney but Kaito would still beat them onsite. Jason and one of Sydney's strongest tactical sections were in the back, the mood sombre. Everyone on board was concerned for the tens of thousands of people they feared being too late to help.

The back section of the helicopter was in a utilitarian configuration with simple chairs for the soldiers to strap into. Jason sat with them, no one uttering a sound. Jason handed out spirit coins, none of them having eaten actual food in weeks. With the status of agricultural areas ranging from under threat to evacuated to under attack, food shortages were already becoming a factor and essence users were all under direction to live exclusively on spirit coins.

It was a small drop in the bucket compared to the food needs of the population at large but every bit would help in what could be a long and harrowing ordeal. The regular consumption of coins would also help the essence users stay fresh and ready for their continuing struggles.

The obvious drawback was the increased need for coins, so China and the US opened up their vaults to keep other parts of the world supplied. France was also contributing, having converted the permanent astral space in Saint-Étienne to a dedicated spirit coin farm. There had been a lot of awkwardness when Farrah had arrived to help them set it up during Jason's sojourn, even with the original Lyon branch members having been replaced by the International Committee.

Jason was likewise pumping out as many coins as he could manage. When finding and shutting down proto-spaces before they could pop, he was taking the time to wipe out any lower-rank monsters he could quickly knock over for the loot. In this, Gordon's sweeping beams were the most effective and the familiar was closing in on his next rank. Jason was still short on the resources required to resummon him, though, but it was hardly the time to be seeking them out.

A wall panel slid open to reveal a screen and Greg's voice came through a speaker.

"Communications just opened with Broken Hill but our people aren't responding. What is coming out is a live news transmission."

The screen blinked to life, showing camera footage of a street filled with chaos, apparently shot by a reporter hiding inside a heavily damaged building. It was far from the only one, some buildings showing collapsed walls while others were on fire, sending up plumes of black smoke. Corpses lay bloody and burned in the street and screams of pain and fear filled the air.

In the middle of the street, a colourfully-dressed man with steel gauntlets was trading blows with a rock monster that had a glowing red gem in its chest. The monster had the edge in strength but the superhero was faster, hammering steel-clad fists on the stone body of the monster. It was a long way from an essence-user fight, at least one Jason or Farrah would be involved in it. No powers were on display, just two supernatural beings pounding away at each other.

As they fought, the reporter's commentary came through.

"...government's unpopular reliance on the so-called Global Defence Network has led to tragedy here in Broken Hill. Claimed as a safe zone, all they accomplished was luring people to their deaths. If not for the rapid intercession of a League of Heroes team, this reporter would already be counted amongst the dead..."

There were actual snarls in the helicopter as people who had thrown everything they had into protecting the populace were badmouthed even as innocents died. Jason opened his map ability, watching the kilometres tick down. Kaito was downing mana potions as quickly as he could while pushing the helicopter to its limits with his abilities, yet their speed felt excruciatingly slow.

With his eyes on the map, Jason felt it as he crossed the distance threshold he needed. His current portal range was four hundred kilometres, and once they got that close to Broken Hill he released his safety belt as he stood up.

The others knew from the briefing that Jason would be heading out alone. He wasn't taking anyone else because he couldn't portal the silver-rankers, which was a good part of the elite section, and he wouldn't take the bronze-rankers and isolate them from the team.

They were quietly glad, as for all their specialist training, they would not plunge into a high-grade monster wave with just their small group. The Adelaide teams would arrive not far behind them for a joint operation.

The side door opened, the influx of air at their incredible speed causing the helicopter to lurch. Jason kept his feet by gripping the seat belt he had just removed and then flung

himself out the door. Gliding towards the ground, he spotted a pleasant enough spot running alongside a creek and rapidly descended there before opening a portal arch and stepping through.

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The EOA's superhero program involved all their latest breakthroughs in human enhancement. Their bones were engraved with magic sigils in a series of deeply invasive surgeries. Their flesh was treated and retreated with alchemical baths, deep-tissue injections and magical radiation therapy. Their blood was drawn out and magically altered using modified dialysis machines.

The body modifications were only a part of the procedure, as without similar changes to the soul the massive bodily augmentations could not be handled by the subjects. Volunteers to the program were subjected to magical sensory bombardment while their bodies were undergoing the treatments. For those able to truly open themselves to the changes the result was soul mutation. Many washed out of the program, unable to truly let go and open up their souls. These unfortunates were inevitably crippled by the incomplete enhancement process, which was hideous enough that most of the ones who didn't die asked to be killed. The EOA complied.

The EOA's methods were akin to some of what Jason had experienced inadvertently, although their methods were much cruder and without the months of treatment Jason was given afterwards to help him through the trauma. They also lacked the strength his soul had already gained from ranking up. The result of the EOA's practices were souls that did grow stronger but were warped in the process.

Decades of advancement had managed to reduce the impact on the mental state of the recipients, although the specific means were a closely guarded secret. The recipients themselves remembered only strange feelings, having been in induced comas through the process. Only echoes remained in their souls.

The earliest iron-rank subjects had suffered from twisted minds, which manifested in ways ranging from catatonia to malevolent and depraved tendencies. As the program developed, advancements were made and the later, Bronze-rank subjects showed significantly better results. While the successful subjects often lacked imagination and critical-thinking skills, they made for excellent dumb muscle.

The latest iteration of the process had entirely eliminated the mental problems through the production of a mysterious and extremely secretive implant. The silver-rank enhanced were mentally normal to all tests, without sacrificing any of the abilities the

earlier iterations shared. They were even possible to produce in larger numbers than previous iterations, allowing for the heroes deployed across the world.

The silver-rank enhanced, like their lower-rank predecessors, were able to use alchemical boosts to enhance their rank temporarily but the key material for the boosts were spirit coins. Without access to gold spirit coins, the ability of the silver-rank enhanced to boost themselves was purely theoretical.

What they did have at full strength were magic tattoos. Unlike the magic tattoos Jason was familiar with, these were designed specifically to work with the enhanced, allowing them to carry multiples of each without the magic coming into conflict. Hidden away beneath their costumes, their magic tattoos gave the enhanced access to more exotic powers than just silver rank strength, toughness and speed. Each of the superhero-branded enhanced was given a standard suite that allowed them to project energy beams from their eyes and fly for short periods.

The enhanced had enough of each tattoo to put on a show or to use in a critical moment, but not to employ continually. Although an essence user could only use one tattoo, the silver-ranked enhanced were able to have eight. Even with this advantage, the lack of boost serum meant the superheroes were no match for an equivalent-rank essence user.

Once alerted to the appearance of monsters in town the EOA's media teams moved in on a helicopter and in cars. The media teams were staffed with bronze-rank enhanced and would be able to handle themselves, whatever they told the audience. When the media were in place, the superheroes activated their first flight tattoos.

The heroes flew over a town of people who were fleeing and screaming in response to the multitude of rock monsters pursuing them through the streets. Some of the monsters were hulking, vaguely-humanoid elementals with no heads and giant, opalescent crystals embedded in their chests. Others were basketball-sized flying creatures of crystal and stone, the crystals of each small monster being either blue or red. The smaller monsters with blue crystals conjured up icicles and shot them like arrows, while the red-crystal monsters sent out motes of fire that burned flesh and buildings alike.

The larger monsters, despite their larger crystals, seemed to have no attendant power. They were rampaging around using pure, brute force, smashing through walls and using cars as bludgeons. They seemed more interested in destruction than in killing while the smaller monsters hunted people almost exclusively. Only the fire types would throw flames at the surroundings if no people were around to offer themselves as targets.



The silver-rank superheroes had strength and fortitude in the upper ranges of silver but their speed was closer to the baseline. Even so, they were weaker but faster than the silver-rank monsters.

Each superhero wore magically-enhanced metal gauntlets so as to not use their bare hands against monsters. Without their boost serum, they were equivalent to a mediocre essence user who never used their abilities properly. Only the occasional burst of eyebeams supplemented their brawling combat.

They did not have the strength or the numbers to handle the monsters. The proto-space they had forcibly unleashed on Broken Hill was a category three, and a strong one at that. The larger monsters were silver-rank and there was no shortage of them. The smaller monsters were all bronze-rank.

This was acceptable to the EOA, however. The objective was not to save the people of Broken Hill but to be seen stepping in when the Network had failed. They would pass off the death toll on the Network's failure, played alongside their own people fighting a desperate, but ultimately doomed battle. The EOA media teams were more than happy to make their narrative explicit, as their target demographic were not the strong thinkers.

"The valour of the League of Heroes is clear but they can only do so much. If the governments of the world would offer them support, perhaps such tragedies could be avoided. So long as they continue to prop up the failing Global Defense Network, how many of the so-called safe zones will suffer the fate of Broken Hill? Is Melbourne or Sydney next?"

The armed militia of the EOA had already long fled, leaving the locals and refugees to their fate. The population of the town, scared and scattered, were buoyed by the arrival of the heroes, only to quickly realise that they were little help. Instead of going after the small monsters hunting people, the heroes rushed into visually exciting clashes with the large monsters destroying the town while leaving the people largely alone.

On the outskirts of town, an obsidian arch rose from the ground. Jason stepped out, his cloak manifesting around him as he surveyed the scene of death and destruction. Despite all the things he had seen, it was an apocalyptic display that gave even him pause.

"Shade, bring the bodies you have protecting the family here. We're going to need them all."

## Chapter 358

### Never Enough

Lauren Chamley and her family hunkered in the bathroom of their house, fearfully checking through the windows from time to time. Crammed in with them was another family, monster wave refugees that the Chamleys had taken in. Many of the families in Broken Hill had opened their homes, although there were never enough places. Most of the people brought in from the surrounding areas had been staying in a tent camp on the outskirts of town.

On one of her periodic checks, Lauren discovered that the house had been set on fire and realised they would need to flee. Knowing it would take both of their cars to carry everyone, she checked the driveway. Of all the terrible crashing they had heard from inside the house, two of those crashes had apparently been the cars. One of them had the back end stomped into the concrete driveway, while the other had wound up in the neighbour's wall, upside down.

The two families reluctantly left the burning house on foot, aiming to get away from the town and the monsters ravaging it. They ducked through yards and took any cover they could find to hide their passage. There were simply too many of them though, leading to their quick discovery.

Although the people they were killing didn't know it, the rock and crystal monsters were unusual for elemental creatures. Most elementals were an unusual type of monster. With their kind, the magical manifestation that would normally create a monster body only created a monster core before mindlessly animating elemental material around it.

These monsters were not actual elementals but true, fully manifested monsters. Although their bodies were of elemental substances the crystal in their forms contained a motive spirit, the false soul that most monsters possessed. What this meant was that rather than mindlessly aggressive elementals, the crystal monsters had minds, if animalistic ones.

Unfortunately, the minds of the small floating monsters had a deep-running vein of sadism, delighting in the pain and suffering of their victims. Rather than go for the kill, they played with their victims like a cat toying with a captured mouse.

The two families were not attacked immediately, the monsters that found them hovering ominously to delight in their fear. This proved lucky as an oddly quiet passenger bus became very loud by smashing through a fence, ramming the monsters and sending them flying.

More monsters were approaching and the bus interposed itself between them and the families. It was a strange design, sleek and black like a bullet train designed by a ninja. The bus door opened to reveal the friendly but anxious face of their neighbour, Griff, who ushered them aboard.

“Our car is in your house,” Lauren told him as she waved her family inside.

“Yeah, that was the point we got out,” Griff said.

The bus took off the moment the last person was in, at which point they noticed it had no driver. The bus was half full of townspeople and was already on the hunt for more survivors. Looking out the windows they saw the monsters peppering the bus with attacks, only for black tendrils to rise out of the bus and intercept them.

“What is going on?” Lauren asked.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Griff said. “I’ve seen more of these busses running around, though. It looks like they’re collecting survivors.”

“Look!” Lauren’s daughter yelled, pointing out the window. Everyone followed her gaze to a dancing figure of darkness and stars, striking down monsters with a sword shimmering with power. The figure moved with impunity, slaying another monster with every flowing motion.

“It’s him, right?” Griff asked.

“It’s him,” Lauren said. “I saw him when he was here a couple of weeks ago. Thank God.”

“I probably wouldn’t say that to his face,” said a voice that sounded vaguely like a butler. “He has a thing about gods.”

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In the almost two months since Shade had reached silver-rank, Jason and Shade had continued to uncover the nuances the familiar’s new abilities. One of those discoveries was that if all the shadow bodies involved in creating a vehicle wore starlight cloaks, the properties of the cloak were bestowed upon the vehicle. This was protecting the buses and the survivors inside from the projectile attacks of the monsters.

It took six shadow bodies to form a bus. This was enough for five buses and one body left over to be Jason’s own shadow, allowing him to coordinate the others. Conjuring all those cloaks had been extremely draining, but the presence of so many aggressive enemies also provided a solution. Every attack against an ally within Jason’s aura inflicted an instance of the Sin condition on the enemy making that attack. With all the attacks hitting the buses, that loaded up the monsters with afflictions.

This was something Jason had been taking advantage of more and more. A Shade body wrapped in a starlight cloak was hard to distinguish from Jason himself unless they were standing still in good light. This made them excellent decoys soaking up attacks and triggering Jason's aura's retaliation. On stronger enemies, this gave Jason a chance to frontload his afflictions, while he had another strategy for the weaker ones. It was a strategy that had sent two of his lingering abilities skyrocketing to the front of the pack.

One of the buses tore away, leaving behind the cluster of now-afflicted little monsters that had been attacking it. Jason tossed his sword into the air and caught it with a shadow hand as he threw his real arms out to the side.

*"Feed me your sins."*

The rock and crystal monsters were immune to Jason's necrotic damage and bleeding powers, but they were subject to the curses levied by his aura. This means that they could be drained away.

The unliving monsters had no life force, so the afflictions were dragged directly out of the crystals in their bodies. The Sin curses flowed out of all the monsters at once and into Jason's waiting hands, flying through the air like a black and purple spiderweb.

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#### Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse, holy).
  - Base cost: Low mana.
  - Cooldown: None.
  
  - Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally, cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability ignores any effect that prevents cleansing. Cannot target self.
  
  - Effect (bronze): Enemies suffer an instance each of [Penance] and [Legacy of Sin] for each condition cleansed from them.
  
  - Effect (silver): Increase cost to moderate to affect all afflicted enemies and allies in a wide area.
  
  - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
  
  - [Legacy of Sin] (affliction, holy, stacking): You are considered more damaged for the purposes of execute ability damage scaling. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Jason had been startled at how swiftly the ability had climbed up once he started using it in this fashion. Even though he'd had to use it on one monster at a time before it ranked up, no cooldown meant that he could fire it off in quick succession. Many fights had been nothing but his aura and his cleansing power, topping off his mana and leaving behind the transcendent damage holy affliction, Penance. That affliction was now burning through the gathered monsters.

Being smaller and only bronze-rank, without the immense vitality that came at silver, the transcendent damage burned through them in short order. They started dissolving into rainbow smoke, and since enemies wholly annihilated by transcendent damage were auto-looted, this was something that Jason had taken advantage of every time he encountered weak, swarming monsters. As Gordon ran around beaming them down, Jason would take out as many as he could using Shade decoys, his aura and his affliction drain.

Feast of Absolution's ascension to silver demonstrated once again why it was arguably Jason's most potent ability. It was the often-overlooked passive it was paired with, however, that gave Jason his first taste of true silver-rank power.

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#### Ability: [Sin Eater] (Sin)

- Special ability (recovery, holy).
  - Cost: None.
  - Cooldown: None.
  
  - Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Increased resistance to afflictions. Gain an instance of [Resistant] each time you resist an affliction or cleanse an affliction using essence abilities.
  
  - Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Integrity] for each affliction you resist or remove using essence abilities.
  
  - Effect (silver): Health, mana and stamina gained through your own essence abilities of the drain and recovery type can exceed the normal maximum. Excess health, stamina and mana deplete over time until the normal maximum is reached.
  
  - [Resistant] (boon, holy, stacking): Resistance to afflictions is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to negate instances of [Vulnerable] on a 1:1 basis.
  
  - [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy, stacking): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Now, instead of wasting all the mana and stamina that Feast of Absolution was feeding him, he could absorb it all, even if it started draining away immediately. More importantly, he could use his health draining abilities while fully recovered, stocking up hit points like a D&D character to absorb hits that would normally take a silver-ranker to survive. That would be less of an issue once he reached silver, but while he remained at bronze-rank it was potentially an immeasurable boon.

Jason had long employed a drain-heal method of staying alive in fights, but without the fortitude of silver-rank, he was always running on a knife's edge. If not for Colin's regeneration, his incredible amulet and his custom combat robe he would have fallen many times.

As monsters disintegrated around him, Jason's shadow detached from his body and turned into a motorcycle. He leapt on and rocketed off in pursuit of another bus being harassed by monsters. As he went, he struck down the monsters he passed with his sword like a hooligan hitting mailboxes with a baseball bat.

He could sense the silver-rank monsters and the superheroes fighting them. It was his first time encountering them in person and he made a startling discovery, but it was not the time to explore it. Since the silver-rank monsters seemed uninterested in the populace, Jason left them for the heroes and continued scooping up survivors.

The five buses could not be everywhere and had to head to Jason's still-open portal to empty themselves of passengers periodically. Jason did his best to shield survivors until a bus could arrive, shepherding them together in readiness to board quickly. He could only cover so much ground, though, and throughout the town he sensed lives being snuffed out in quick succession. He had to rely on his meditative techniques to keep his mind clear, knowing that bad decisions made in anger would cost lives.

\*\*\*

On Kaito's helicopter, the passengers were still watching the live feed from the town.

"... Jason Asano, the Starlight Rider, has arrived to join the other heroes in trying to save the town. Despite his valiant efforts, however, the situation only serves to highlight how one hero has been propping up the failing Global Defense Network. Even as we watch, the—"

Suddenly the cracked door they were filming through was swung wide open.

"Why is there a bunch of people with magic powers hiding in here, pretending to be a news crew, while people who don't have any powers are dying out there?" Jason growled. "You are going to get out of here and start helping people to safety."

He pointed to one end of town.

"Find anyone not on a bus and get them to the portal down that end of town. If I find you hiding again – and I will – you'll wish the monsters got to you first, you cowardly sacks of shi–"

The feed cut out, replaced by a pair of news anchors.

"Uh, we seem to be having technical difficulties, but I'm sure our news team will be fine with Jason Asano watching over them. Going to Michael for analysis of the unfolding situation..."

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"...military and GDN personnel are rapidly setting up a camp to receive them, even as more Broken Hill residents emerge from the portal you're seeing on screen. We are standing some four-hundred kilometres from Broken Hill, yet the people escaping are claiming that they travelled that distance instantaneously through the mysterious arch believed to be one of the Starlight Rider's many abilities. There seems to be a strong nauseating factor to the exotic form of travel as many of the escapees are demonstrating, right on the grass..."

Terrance was talking on his phone as he watched the coverage.

"Make sure the coverage highlights the difference between the EOA fighting monsters and Jason rescuing people. I want to see interviews with every person from Broken Hill with the power of speech. No, don't send a news crew to the town, you maniac. Take a footage feed from Kaito's drones and have a panel of analysts dissect how useless their superheroes are."

Just as he ended the call, Aram came rushing into Terrance's office.

"New development?" Terrance asked.

"We're pretty sure the EOA are responsible for the Broken Hill disaster."

"No kidding," Terrance said. "I do not want a single word of that getting into the press. No pointed suggestions, no leaks, nothing."

"Isn't it bad for them?"

"The moment accusations start, the EOA will turn it around to accuse us of setting them up. Salacious accusations going back and forth slide right into their tone of discourse, not ours, which will make us look desperate."

"We have proof!"

"So does climate change and how's that going? If I hear anyone on our side peddling a line about the EOA being behind this, I will personally have wild monkey sex with your father."

"My father's dead, you arsehole."

“Then he won’t struggle, will he? Get back to work.”

\*\*\*

Jason was tireless as he went through Broken Hill, constantly draining afflictions to amass stamina and mana. He would lure monsters to a bus to draw them away from scattered survivors and then afflict and drain them in clusters, before sending the buses to collect those survivors.

His incredible senses allowed him to tag monsters and survivors on his tactical map ability, the sight of which constantly threatened to crush his spirit. As fast as he worked and as hard as he fought, it was never enough. Again and again, the red dots of an unfriendly intersected with the green dot of a friendly, which then blinked out.

The superheroes had finally finished off the silver-rank monsters and had started chasing down the smaller ones, but they were built for cinematic battles, not efficient sweep-and-clear. Only the arrival of Kaito and the Network strike teams would be able to carry that out successfully, their numbers and practised tactics outpacing what Jason could accomplish.

When reinforcements finally came into range of his voice chat power, Jason was filled with relief at the assistance and remorse that he couldn’t do more. It hadn’t been that long but it felt like an endless slog as more and more lives faded from his senses. He opened up a voice chat to start relaying the situation they were flying into.

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Finally, Jason found himself in the remains of the town, every civilian in it either dead or evacuated. He had used his portal again and again as it reached capacity. At his current rank, a thousand normals could go through before hitting the limit, which put the survivor count, based on portal use, at less than twenty-thousand survivors.

He had swept the town and patrolled the outskirts multiple times to make sure, as had Kaito with his drones. He stood amongst the ruins and the dead, feeling empty and at a loss. They didn’t have hard numbers yet but he could see with his own eyes the bodies piled up in the burned-out remains of the tent camp. Based on that and his portal count, he estimated somewhere between ten and fifteen-thousand had died.

Jason instinctually wanted to collect up the bodies instead of just leaving them where they lay, but there would be an organised operation to collect and identify the dead that he would only muddle up if he interfered.

His gaze turned to the superheroes, standing together with their media team who were pointing a camera his way.



## Chapter 359

### Media Landscape

Smoke rose from smouldering buildings into an orange sunset over Broken Hill.

“Shade,” Jason said quietly as he looked over at the EOA media team. “Please find an ordinary handgun and discreetly leave it nearby.”

Jason had spotted enough armed dead that it would not be a difficult task. He had seen the military personnel, mostly clustered around their post near the tent city. Many of them had been killed by firearms rather than monsters. Only a handful of the military had survived, isolated and armed with weapons that couldn’t harm the monsters. He got them out with the other survivors, although a few had insisted on trying to fight. Rather than let them learn the hard way, he had Shade knock them out and then shoved them on a bus with the others.

He had also seen some black-clad corpses other than the Network’s tactical section, which were likely part of the group responsible for the Broken Hill tragedy. Not all of them had managed to safely extract, whether due to monster attacks or the military and Network personnel not going down as easily as anticipated.

One of Shade’s bodies slipped away, unseen in the growing shadows of evening.

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Penelope was the leader of the EOA’s media team.

“I don’t know that talking to him is a good idea,” she said.

“It’s all upsides,” said, Garret, the leader of the superhero team. “You said yourself that we were having trouble finding stand-out personalities in our hero ranks. If we can associate ourselves with Asano, that might change. He’s the face of magic right now.”

“I don’t think he’s going to be very accommodating,” Penelope said.

“That’s fine, too. If he accuses us of setting all this in motion, we use it to tar the Network. One way or the other, it’s a win for us.”

“We could make a point that he’s a better fit for the League of Heroes than the Network,” Penelope mused. “There’s no way he jumps ship, but we have been working to paint him as being one of us who only works for them. An actual interview might help push that along.”

“See?” Garret said. “We win every way.”

They were speaking quietly as the face of the media team, Davina, was giving a voice over for the live feed as the camera recorded Jason.

“As the sun truly sets on Broken Hill, we can only wonder if the historic town will ever see a new dawn after the catastrophe it has suffered. For all his valiant efforts, Jason Asano, the Starlight Rider, stands in the ruins of the Global Defense Network’s failure. Again, we apologise to viewers for the graphic images on display...”

As Davina continued to narrate, Penelope silently grabbed her attention, communicating her intentions with hand signals. Davina nodded.

“We’re going to approach Mr Asano with the head of the League of Heroes team, Garret Dunhurst, a.k.a. Skybolt. Skybolt, this will be your first time meeting with your fellow hero, is this correct?”

“It is, Davina, and I only wish it could be under better circumstances. Unfortunately, the crisis we all face means that every hero is facing terrible circumstances and the Starlight Rider is no exception.”

Davina, Garret and the camera operator approached Jason. They could only see the silver eyes under his hood, the light on the camera failing to penetrate it.

“Mr Asano, despite working side by side with your fellow heroes, the death toll is clearly in the thousands. Do you think that closer collaboration with your fellow heroes might reduce the impact should further GDN safe zones be compromised?”

Seconds ticking over in the dead air as they awaited Jason’s response.

“Mr Asano?”

“You think we’re heroes?” Jason asked in a voice of weariness-infused gravel. “Stepping forward is the absolute minimum to expect of people with our abilities. To do any less would make us nothing but worthless cowards. If you want to see heroes, look to the people who have no powers yet they step onto the same field as us. And why do they do that? For no more reason than there are people in need of help. They don’t have the strength to face what we can face, but here they are, making the ultimate sacrifice.”

He gestured at the ruined town around them.

“If you want to find heroes, go digging through the rubble. They’re piled high. You think we compare to them because we run around in costumes, fighting monsters?”

“We protect the people,” Garret said.

“We aren’t the ones that will get the world through this calamity,” Jason said. “We can help some people, yes, but we’re just a symbol. The people of the world will get through this disaster not by waiting for some fool in a costume like me to save them. They’ll get through this by coming together, the human race united. A network of people who are heroes not for the powers they possess but their willingness to raise one another out of the darkness.”

Garret could feel himself losing control of the narrative and tried to guide Jason towards making an accusation.

“Those people will need leadership and guidance. Heroes to show them the way. Surely you recognise that without us, the body count today would have been much greater, perhaps even total.”

“Leadership and guidance,” Jason repeated. “That’s the kind of language you hear from dictators. In the free world, we choose our leaders, they don’t choose us, but I can see why you would think that way, given where your powers come from. We may accept your League of Heroes because the monsters are here and we need everyone we can get. But I won’t forget who unleashed those monsters in the first place so that you could run around playing super friends. There will come a day when the monsters aren’t looming over us and the people hiding behind you will face a reckoning.”

“Just to be clear,” Davina said, “Mr Asano, are you claiming that there is some kind of secret cabal behind the League of Heroes who brought the monsters down on us all? That is quite the accusation, for which I assume you have some amount of proof.”

The chuckle that came from inside Jason’s dark hood could have frozen water.

“I don’t need to prove anything or convince anyone. The day will come when the people hidden in the dark will die, alone and unknown. And no one will ever hear about it.”

“You were just talking about dictatorship,” Davina said. “Now you’re talking about extrajudicial murder?”

“Someone needs to hold the men behind the curtain to account, but if you don’t like it, who’s going to stop me?” Jason asked. “Your heroes, here?”

A pair of silver eyes fixed on Garret.

“Are you going to stand in my way, Spybolt?”

“It’s Skybolt.”

“I don’t care. I’ll be the villain to your hero, but you’d best stop me now. You’re as strong as you’re ever going to get, while my power grows with every passing day.”

He turned back on the reporter.

“What about you, Davina? You’re one of the league’s secret heroes. Are you going to stop me?”

“I don’t know where you got this idea about me having powers came from but you are completely wrong.”

“Is that so? Shade, if you would?”

A shadowy figure emerged from the camera operator’s shadow, taking the camera off his shoulder and focused on Davina. A shadow arm shot out from Jason and picked up a

nearby pistol, which Jason then pointed at the reporter as Shades rose up behind her and Jason both. With silver-rank reflexes, Garret interposed himself between Jason and the reporter but Jason was already disappearing into his own Shade.

He emerged behind the reporter, shooting her in the back of the head without hesitation. Garret had the reflexes but not the awareness to stop it, taking just too long to realise where Jason appeared from. Davina staggered forward a few steps, groaning loudly as she held a hand over her head where she was shot.

“You’re a maniac!” she spat at Jason, turning around to face him. He pulled his hood back to reveal his face, his eyes were bloodshot, red and puffy from tears. In an instant, he went from faceless menace to a man shattered in grief at the tragedy around him.

“I’m sorry,” he said bitterly. “If that bullet to the head left you with a headache, maybe you don’t have powers. That’s why you hid instead of stepping out to help these people, right?”

“You can stop your play, Asano,” Penelope said. “The studio cut the broadcast.”

Jason didn't bother to say anything more, opening a portal and stepping through.

They arrived a short distance from the camp containing the Broken Hill survivors. Jason started walking in that direction over the yellow, shin-high grass.

“You did grab the memory drive from the camera, right?” Jason asked.

“Of course,” Shade said. “I am uncertain how it will help, though, given that the footage went out live.”

“Never underestimate the value of the unedited original,” Jason said. “There was probably a broadcast delay on the live feed, so there’s no telling how much they managed to edit our little play.”

“I cannot help but notice that with your ability to control your physiology, as grief-inducing as the day's events were, you should neither get bloodshot eyes nor produce tears.”

“The dead deserve tears,” Jason said. “Your father best take care of them or he and I are going to have words.”

“I don’t think you are ready to threaten the Reaper, Mr Asano.”

“Not yet.”

He tucked his hood back up over his head as they drew closer to the camp.

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“This is a wagonload of horse manure,” Terrance said. “I have work to do.”

“Not if you get removed from your position, you don’t,” Anna told him as they walked the halls of the Network office in Sydney. “Make no mistake, if this workplace mediation doesn’t go well, you will be replaced.”

As a publicity man, Terrance was forced to admire Anna’s choice of tearing him down in the halls where anyone could and would overhear. It sent a message that the upper management was accountable, the general staff were respected and that family was not a shield against bad behaviour. That did not mean that he wouldn’t argue back.

“We have more important things to deal with than someone’s feelings getting hurt.”

“Terry, you threatened to have sex with the man’s dead father. I’ve worked with Aram a long time and he’s a good man whose father was incredibly important to him. You are going to apologise and you are going to god damn mean it or I will throw you out of the building myself.”

“You can’t force me to be sincere.”

“Terry, we all need to be at our very best. If people refuse to deal with you, people that you need to rely on, then things are going to get missed. If they have someone who has authority over them and is free to abuse them, that is going to detract from their performance. This isn’t you and me in the backyard. These are people that work hard, work well and are deserving of your respect. The problem here, Terry, is you, and I will excise that problem one way or another. If you can’t get your head around that and realise that you need to do better, then I do not want you here. Which, in case you’re not paying attention, means that you won’t be.”

“You’re not the only member of the Steering Committee, Anna. Some of the others like the way I do things.”

“And they’ll interfere when I try to fire you,” Anna acknowledged. “But do they have the stones to interfere when I throw you off the roof?”

“Oh, come on, Anna.”

“You’ll survive,” she said. “You can go liquid form.”

“It’ll take me hours to pool myself back together after a fall like that. That’s assuming I don’t lose any of myself down a storm drain again.”

“Don’t worry,” Anna said. “I’ll have the stuff from your office boxed up and waiting for you.”

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Jason quietly arrived at Asano Village in the washed-out light of predawn. He had spent the night in the survivor’s camp but not to sleep. He hadn’t been sure what solace he

could offer the survivors but all he had left to give was his time. He then spent additional hours in debrief and even more time talking to the press.

Erika, Emi and Ken gathered around him, catching him in a supportive embrace. They moved to the lounge of the village's main residence, Emi sitting on a couch between Jason and her mother, each of them holding one of her hands.

For all that Emi's intelligence and maturity was beyond her age, the things she had seen that day had been a lot for a thirteen-year-old. Erika had told Emi she shouldn't watch the news but hadn't stopped her. They had all been glued to the television, catching every glimpse of Jason amongst the violence and the ruins and the death.

Jason and his family sat in awkward silence. Like much of the country and even the world, they had been watching him on the news all day. It began with the early scraps of action captured by the hiding EOA team, then the interviews with survivors. Footage from Kaito's drones had been fed live to the press, showing Jason moving like a dark, flittering bug in his desperate striving to extricate survivors.

Many countries around the world had fought back against the EOA's media control, including Australia. The Emergency Communications Act had passed with overwhelming support in Parliament, despite unprecedented pushback from the media on all fronts. Not only did the law enact massive emergency funds for the public broadcast network but required government information updates to air daily on all free-to-air networks and instituted an Office of Media Disinformation with fierce enforcement powers.

Privacy advocates pushed back against what they termed draconian measures against press freedom, which the media companies got entirely behind with complaints about editorial independence. The wake of tragedy, however, was always the easiest time to curtail civil liberties. Broken Hill was the largest of Australia's disasters, but not the first.

"I'm not going to keep Shade's bodies with you anymore," Jason said finally. "I like being able to communicate and know that he's there if something happens. It's become clear to me, though, that I need to stop splitting my power."

Shade had called his bodies back to Jason but it had taken time for them to get into range. They could only merge from forty kilometres away and had merged into an unmanned surveillance plane, moving at speed before travelling the last leg through the portal. In the time it took, there was one less bus picking up survivors than there could have been. Jason couldn't help but think of the lives that he failed to save.

"We understand," Erika said.

His mind kept going back to the waterfall village where he had fought the elemental tyrant as the villagers evacuated. He had saved everyone that day. Everyone. All it had

cost him was a scar. He was so much more powerful, now, yet he had done so much worse. He was unmarked but thousands of people were dead. He knew that one monster was different from an entire proto-space worth, but that didn't offer him solace.

"I need to get stronger," he murmured, head bowed.

"You're already strong, son," Ken said.

"No," Jason said. "I've seen power so vast that my mind is too limited to comprehend the scope of it. I'm a grain of sand before that. A bug on a windshield."

"What will you be if you get that kind of power?" Erika asked. "You're talking about god-like power, right? Is that what you want for yourself? If you become that powerful, will we be the grains of sand to you?"

Jason looked up her with tremulous eyes.

"I don't know," he said.

"Power isn't everything, Jason," Erika told him, nodding at Emi's small hand in his. "Power can't offer you that."

He tilted his head as he sensed a familiar aura approaching.

"What is it?" Ken asked.

"Someone I know just arrived at the village gate."

"As in the gate three kilometres away?" Erika asked. She and Ken both had aura senses, but theirs barely covered the room.

Jason's senses had grown to incredible proportions. They were based in his aura strength, although they reached further than his aura, like a radar sending out signals. He was still getting a handle on them, though.

In the familiar calm of Asano Village, they weren't onerous. In Broken Hill, the monsters and the chaos was overwhelming but he'd pushed himself to endure extending his senses to the limit. He had to know where the survivors needed him most.

Jason stood up.

"I'll be back in a moment," he said, opening a portal and stepping through, emerging outside the village gate. Most of the people camping there had long gone as food shortages became worse. They had been forced to the cities where the government was rationing out food supplies after seizing control of the supply chains. Only the most committed and unhinged people remained outside Asano village.

A car had stopped in front of the gate and the security guard on duty had emerged from the booth. It was some distant cousin Jason didn't really know, looking at him nervously.

"It's fine," Jason said. "I'll handle this."

Dawn stepped out of the car, an expensive but ordinary European sedan.

“I’m sorry about what you went through today.”

“Save your sympathy for the families of the dead.”

“Very well. I was hoping you might put me up for a little while. A normal-rank avatar isn’t up to the rigours of an increasingly dangerous world, as you well know.”



## Chapter 360

### Instability

In the Sydney branch's media operations centre, Terrance was going through the footage Jason had stolen from the EOA at Broken Hill again, discussing it with his publicity staff.

"The key to what he's doing here is that he's not telling us what the EOA's secrets are, which would get people immediately calling bull. He's 'inadvertently' letting slip in his anger that he knows what the EOA's secrets are. Instead of people denying what he's telling us, he's got them wondering what he's keeping to himself."

He pointed at one of his staffers.

"Hailey, what is number one on trending right now?"

"Which platform?" she asked.

"Just pick one."

"Alright, boss, just a moment... number one is #scottbaioeyebears."

"Scott Baio? The Charles in Charge guy? You know what I'm looking for, Hailey."

"Number three is #wheredothepowerscomefrom."

"Where do the powers come from?" Terrance repeated. "When the monster waves started, people were asking about the powers but it was one more thing in a world gone crazy. Now people are getting a handle on monsters and superheroes, so it's time to refocus that question, which is exactly what Asano just did."

The doors opened up and Aram came in.

"The Steering Committee wants an in-person update," he said.

"Very well," Terrance said. "Hailey, take over the analysis. Pay particular attention to the way that instead of going against the EOA's hero narrative, Asano played into it to give himself the authority he then used to undercut it. Seriously, I could kiss that man. I mean, I couldn't, he was very clear on that, but still..."

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Jason and Dawn were riding the underground tram out to the cloud house.

"You're getting close to silver-rank, now," she said.

"Events have accelerated my advancement," he said flatly. "If I had the choice, I'd rather it take longer and not have all the death."

Globally, the death toll from the monster waves was over two-hundred thousand, although those were soft numbers. The count was potentially much higher.

"You have a question for me," Dawn said. "One that you need to ask before we can move forward."

"Why didn't you tell me about Farrah?"

"You realise that you could have asked that instead of punching my nose through my brain."

"No regrets. I bet you were all 'that little bastard' afterwards."

"Of course I wasn't," she lied. "I'm an ancient and powerful being, so I'm a little more mature than someone who just turned twenty-six. I noticed that you didn't celebrate your birthday last week."

"It's not a celebratory time. I never liked my birthday anyway."

"Because it's on April Fool's Day?"

"It might seem like a fun combination but it's not," Jason said. "Why didn't you tell me about Farrah?"

"Because of you."

"Me?"

"If I had come to you when you first arrived back, what you have done?"

"I'd have gone and got her."

"No," Dawn said. "You'd have died trying. Think about the state you were in when you got back. No local resources, no allies, no information, no understanding of the magical society of your world. You were also still very much caught up in a war mentality. Your first instinct to every obstacle was to murder it."

"I'd have found a way."

"You did, when you were ready. You had allies, information and a more balanced mindset."

"You could have shown me how."

"And would you have trusted me enough to listen?"

He grimaced.

"No," he acknowledged.

"She was sent here to help you, not just as a warrior but as a friend. She understands what you've been through because she has been through much the same. Most of all, she is someone you can trust. It took time to get there, even with your family. Except for your niece, but she couldn't offer you the support you needed."

"I know what Farrah represents," Jason growled, then his face softened. "And I am grateful that she was brought back."

“You can thank the Reaper for that,” Dawn said. “He was the one who offered. He wanted to avoid the World Phoenix sending your soul zipping back and forth across the astral with her tokens every time she needed you in one world or the other.”

“And now I have to figure out how to astral travel fully intact or not at all,” Jason said.  
“You will.”

The tram tunnel emerged from underground into the underwater section.

“This is rather nice,” Dawn said.

“I like it. I have more questions for you.”

“The Builder did not violate the agreement,” Dawn said.

“Then how are the Engineers of Ascension making converted with his clockwork cores?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t know everything, Mr Asano, and I can only tell you so much of what I do. What I can tell you is that the Builder has not intervened in this world any time in the last five centuries or so.”

“Unless he found a way to sneak past you.”

“Sneaking past me is possible,” Dawn said. “Sneaking past the World-Phoenix is not.”

“You’re saying you can’t help me figure out what’s going on, then?”

“I am not saying that. I would direct you to the defector from the EOA leadership who is working with the American Network branches. She has insights into their enhancement program from its very origins.”

“How exactly is it that you get your information?” Jason asked.

“I’m not going to tell you that.”

“Is it just a bunch of people?”

“It is not just a bunch of people.”

“You don’t want to tell me who they are because then I could just go ask the bunch of people myself, right?”

“It is not just a bunch of people!”

“Sure, it’s not. I totally believe you.”

“I’m beginning to understand why the Builder was so caught up in killing someone as insignificant as you.”

“Rude.”

The tram came to a stop at the end of the tunnel and they went through the airlock into the cloud house. Jason looked around as he did every time he entered, still happy with the configuration of interlinked domes.

"This is rather nice," Dawn said, the air shimmering with light passing through the water outside. "It reminds me of home a little."

"And where's home?" Jason asked.

"The city-universe of Interstice," she said. "It's minute by the standards of a normal reality, but quite large by the standards of a city. It is also profoundly magical, yet unique in that monsters do not manifest there. Many consider it to be the capital city of the astral, at least the portion of it that we know. The astral is more vast than even a diamond-ranker like myself can conceptualise."

"So, the astral has its own societies, then?"

"Many worlds are more familiar with astral travel than the one you have known. Pallimustus has rather undeveloped astral magic, although the Builder's intervention is changing that. Even now, your friend Clive is deciphering and disseminating more advanced astral knowledge."

"You know about my team?"

"They are all doing well. They do not know that you are alive again, however."

"Knowledge must know I'm not dead. She knew about the token your boss gave me."

"She knows. She just isn't telling."

"Bloody transcendents and their bloody games," he muttered, shaking his head.

They went through a tunnel into a lounge room, each sitting in a comfortable cloud armchair.

"I'd offer you refreshments but I don't keep any on hand," Jason said. "Rationing, you know."

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"...consistently gaining ground in defining the discourse," Terrance reported. He was standing in the Steering Committee meeting room giving his report.

"The EOA was always running on a clock before they lost control of the narrative," he continued. "We're seeing them pay for it now. Even in the beginning, certain areas were resistant to their obfuscation. In the US, for example, the EOA has incredible media dominance but the Emergency Broadcast System cut through a lot of the noise. Now that countries are enacting media intervention laws like our Emergency Communications Act, the EOA can't muddy the waters so easily."

"We know the EOA have been insinuating themselves into states who have long felt that the Network was a tool of the west," Anna said. "Certain states are even looking to oust the Network and have the EOA fill the role. This is the EOA's endgame, as far as we can tell. What is your assessment, based on media analysis, for further action on this front?" Anna asked.

"If the projections of the grid coming back up inside of two to three weeks hold up, then I think the EOA are pretty much out of steam in terms of infiltrating governments. I would be looking out for a reorientation of their plans moving forward. There is no way they don't know about the grid projections, so we're keeping a sharp eye for a shift in messaging that might indicate whatever new approach they're going for."

"Alright, thank you, Terrance," The committee chairwoman said. "So long as nothing else terrible comes up, I don't anticipate there being any problems."

"Oh, come on," Terrance exclaimed. "Why would you say something like that?"

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"Why are you here, Dawn?" Jason asked. "I'm sure that you could find a nice, secure spot in any of the big cities."

"I warned you in the past of what is happening to your world as the magical density grows."

"You did."

"Most of the astral spaces on this world were already going undiscovered, under the water," she said. "With the deactivation of the grid, the rate of magic being introduced to your world increased by a third, which is a not-inconsiderable amount."

"It's accelerated the process," Jason said. "Not hard to surmise."

"It's worse than that, I'm afraid. I've been studying the effects on your world and the rate of acceleration seems to have crossed some manner of threshold."

"Meaning something's happened that won't get fixed when the grid goes back up? I don't suppose you ever considered helping with that. Or warning us what the EOA was up to?"

"I am an astral magic specialist, Mr Asano. While I am not unversed in array magic, I am used to operating with higher-order magic, meaning higher-rank rituals in high-magic zones. Your friend, Farrah, is more conversant with lower-order array magic than I am and better suited to the task. As for warning you, there are rules on how much I am allowed to interfere."

"That seems like a convenient excuse for acting when you want to and ignoring us when you don't."

"Then where do we draw the line, Mr Asano? Where would you like the intervention of higher-order beings to stop? Do you want the World-Phoenix coming in and solving all your problems? Of course, what constitutes a problem and an acceptable solution would be for us to decide. What if it was the Reaper instead? The Builder? How much freedom are you willing to give up? Knowing you, Mr Asano, I'm guessing not very much. There are lines that we do not cross and I recommend you be grateful for that. As it stands, my presence here is already edging that line. I am a servant of the World-Phoenix, whose authority is dimensional integrity, so I have some leeway on how free I can be with information pertaining to that. Anything else I need to be more careful with. I can help you connect dots but not draw the dots myself. Even then, I must be cautious."

Jason looked unhappy but nodded, acknowledging the point.

"If you're an astral magic specialist," he said, "how about you help me get my head around these books that Knowledge gave me?"

"Yes."

"Wait, yes? As in yes, you'll help me out without bugging about being mysterious?"

"Yes."

"Uh... great. Thank you."

"I will need some local accommodation."

"We can do that. The food won't be terrific; we're rationing the same as everyone else."

"This avatar can be sustained on spirit coins."

"No worries, then. Now, back to what you were saying about some kind of change that won't be fixed when the grid goes back up. Are you talking about direct manifestations, with no proto-spaces?"

"No, that is still a number of years away. A smaller number, now, but there is time for more pressing concerns. What I am talking about is something even I have not seen before. Do recall that I told you about the previous Builder creating this universe as an experiment?"

"Something about making it using existing realities as a template instead of starting from scratch?"

"Precisely. I have been examining the dimensional integrity of this world and I believe that the increased magic from the current circumstances has triggered a unique symptom of instability based on templates from which your world was constructed. Once the grid is back up, the acceleration in magic will be arrested somewhat as the proto-spaces it

detects are once more being intercepted. At that point, I believe the instability will show itself, like a dimensional whiplash effect.”

“Show itself how?”

“By the flaws introduced in the way this universe was constructed manifesting directly. Pockets of reality, warping into patterns based on the templates on which this reality was designed.”

“What will that look like?”

“Like an astral or proto-astral space. Different geography, climate, magical conditions. Except there will be no dimensional boundary. Instead of being connected to your world, these zones will be part of it, the space they occupied being reshaped on the most fundamental level.”

“What about people in that space?”

“I don’t know.”

“Will there be monsters?”

“I don’t know. What the previous Builder did here was drastic enough that he was removed and replaced. This is, as far as I am aware, unprecedented. If the World-Phoenix knows more, it has not shared that information with me.”

“Doesn’t feel great, does it?”

“No, it does not.”

“So, what do we do?” Jason asked. “Farrah said the grid reactivation team is hoping to get it back up in less than two weeks. Until just now, I thought that was a good thing.”

“All you can do is warn the world. I am not withholding information here; I truly do not know. You will need to discover how to deal with whatever comes for yourselves, although I have a place that you can start.”

“You’re going to connect some dots for me?”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “It is time for Akari Asano to tell you why she is really here.”

## Chapter 361

### Supernatural

"Really?" Dawn asked. Shade's motorcycle form made almost no noise but with the rush of air, she spoke loudly.

"What?" Jason asked back.

"You have a portal power."

"Which I might need to use in an emergency."

"Your familiar can turn into a car."

"On a beautiful day like this?"

"Or more than one motorcycle."

"I don't know what you're complaining about," Jason said. "Emi loves the sidecar."

Dawn's senses relied on projecting her aura through her avatar, but Jason sensed nothing, even as his emotions were laid bare.

As well as Jason hid it, his tangled nest of grief, frustration, and shame were plain for her to see. She had been observing him long enough to know that banter was a key coping mechanism of his and she let herself fall into it as they rode through the bushland separating the communal area of Asano Village from the residential clusters.

The roads were only months old but well made, the product of Ken's earth manipulation powers and a construction crew brought in by Hiro. The workers had been told that they were the day crew. The extra work they found done each morning was attributed to the night crew, who they never saw. They were paid well to not ask questions, so they overlooked the myriad incongruities that came from the night crew being Jason's father and his magic powers.

Jason and Dawn followed the road as it wound through pleasant bushland and climbed to the clifftop residential cluster, the most remote of Asano Village's mini-suburbs. Jason pulled the bike to a stop where a large yard spanned the gap between the road and the cliff-hugging house. Aside from a tiled path leading to the front door, the yard was all open grass.

There was an outdoor cabinet next to the door, up against the stone wall of the house. It had a magic lock that any essence-user could open with a little mana. Jason did so, taking out a pair of silver-rank suppression collars, along with two swords covered in faintly-glowing runes.



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Item: [Practise Sword] (bronze rank, common)

*Practise sword designed to allow full-contact attacks in safety (weapon, sword).*

- Effect: All damage dealt by this weapon is negated, replaced with a mild stinging sensation.
- Effect: Inflicts [Minor Stun]. Strength of stun is based on the amount of damage that would have been dealt.
- [Minor Stun] (affliction, magic): Causes loss of function in the area of the body affected. Affects a larger area of the body when used against targets lower than bronze-rank. Delivers debilitating disorientation when used on vital areas.

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Dawn waited at the edge of the yard with Shade, who had returned to his natural form of a shadow with silver eyes. Jason moved to the middle of the yard, letting out a pulse of aura, even though he knew Akari would have heard his approach. He clipped one of the suppression collars around his neck.

The collars Akari brought with her from Japan were more artistically designed than others Jason had seen. Most suppression collars were thick, plain and not designed with the comfort of the wearer in mind. These were more like jewellery, with elegant engraving and silver gilding. It would not be hard for him to shrug off the collar's effect but he let it work.

Akari emerged from the house wearing a dark blue kendo gi. Her hair was in a practical ponytail that always reminded him of Sophie, despite Akari's hair being shampoo-commercial shimmering black instead of metallic silver. Jason was wearing track pants, sneakers and an H.R. Pufnstuf t-shirt. She wordlessly took one of the swords and the other suppression collar, snapping it around her neck.

Jason and Akari squared off in the middle of the yard, each watching for openings. When they had started practising together, they had been evenly matched. Akari was a specialised swordswoman but had been caught up in human fighting styles designed around human limitations. She made good use of her speed, but her superhuman body was capable of far more than she was using it for.

Jason, by contrast, made complete use of his peak bronze-rank attributes. They were not the equal of her silver-rank attributes but his were fully leveraged when he fought. Her highly aggressive approach was not inherently bad but was poorly-suited to confront Jason's style heavily employing feints and counterattacks.

Jason was hard to read for the aggressive Akari, who found herself repeatedly baited into missteps and overextensions. Almost every loss she suffered found her admonishing herself for exposing herself.

Jason's strange, chimeric style would shift from approach to approach in ways that should have been discordant yet were somehow natural and smooth. In one moment it resembled kendo and the next, capoeira. Bursts of direct, rapid aggression gave way to elaborate and outlandish movements that seemed more like dance or acrobatics than combat. It shouldn't have worked, yet because of his superhuman capabilities, it did.

As weeks turned into months, Jason would arrive again and again at her door to fight. With Akari's unflinching analysis and unswerving dedication, she rapidly addressed the flaws Jason had revealed in her combat style.

Jason was diligent in his swordsmanship, but for Akari, the sword was the core of her being. She learned to leverage her own attributes in her own way while modulating her forceful aggression into precision and care, improving her ability to read feints, avoid dangerous counterattacks and adapt to Jason's unconventional style.

Akari had been training in the sword as long as she could remember. Jason had little to offer in improving her technique, but the principles of the way he fought helped her to reforge herself with the tools she already possessed. A lifetime of training gave her the means to awaken her potential; Jason merely provided the impetus.

Jason had likewise learned from Akari. He tended to overcomplicate and get caught up in trying to be clever when clean, simple and direct was the superior choice. He did not share Akari's immersion in the way of the sword, so he did not make the same strides as her, but she helped him work on the weakest area of his technique, which was efficiency.

After two months, he went from winning four in ten spars to one in twenty when they faced off in the open yard. That ratio shifted significantly upward when they moved into the bush, however, where even without his powers, Jason moved like a ghost. The dedication Akari put into being a swordswoman, Jason put into being a predator.

As Dawn watched on they had a typical spar, with Jason infuriatingly hard to pin down. Akari was relentless, however, punishing every mistake Jason made with his wild combat style. Jason still managed to goad her into an opening, turning the tables with a flurry of counterattacks. Even on the back foot, however, Akari was calm, efficient and precise. What had once been a desperate defence was now clinical in execution, dismantling Jason's momentum as she inexorably turned the tables back.

Landing a clean hit on Jason's leg arrested his mobility as the stun inflicted by the sword took effect. This signalled the end as Jason at his best was barely able to hold her

off. A strike to his other leg dropped him to the ground, where her sword down on his head.

The magic of the sword meant he didn't feel more than a mild sting from any of it, pain an iron-ranker could ignore, let alone a peak bronze-ranker. The finisher was disorienting stun effect to his head that delivered a bout of debilitating vertigo. He lay on his back, giggling like a child who had spun themselves dizzy as he felt the world turn wildly around him.

Akari took Jason's sword and unclipped his suppression collar. The training device had a simple clasp to keep it closed, with no key. She looked down at him as Jason pushed himself onto his elbows, still grinning with a giddy expression.

"Sometimes I suspect you're losing on purpose just to get hit in the head with the training swords."

"No worries on that front," Jason said. "If I did that, you'd use your real sword on me."

"Just as long as you know," she said, helping Jason unsteadily to his feet. It left them standing close to one another.

"I should have been there with you," she said softly.

He gave her a smile devoid of his usual smirking undertone.

"It's not like you were taking a spa day. Broken Hill didn't stop every other threat out there and you had your own people to help."

"You shouldn't have had to face that alone."

"I didn't. I just got there a little earlier. Once the troops arrived I was pretty much reduced to opening portals and directing bus traffic."

Akari frowned.

"You don't always have to be self-effacing, you know. It's the most Japanese thing about you, but it feels wrong when you do it."

He flashed her a grin.

"I'll keep my shameless braggadocio completely unearned, thank you very much."

"Definitely wrong."

She shook her head, then turned to look at Dawn.

"Who's your friend?"

"Your new housemate. We don't have enough places to give every swinging single their own crash pad. Let's go say g'day."

They walked across the lawn to meet Dawn as Akari removed the collar from her own neck.

"Asano Akari," Akari greeted with a respectful bow.

"This is Dawn," Jason introduced. "She may seem ordinary, but I assure you that she is not. In fact, she is, quite likely, the most remarkable human being on this planet."

"May I ask how so?" Akari asked. Her demeanour around Dawn was significantly more respectful than her casual attitude with Jason.

"Well, for starters, she's neither a human being nor on this planet."

"I think I'll step in," Dawn said. "Jason is notoriously bad at explaining things. My name is Dawn, as he said, and I am a diamond-ranker from outside of your reality. This body you see is an avatar; a near-powerless projection of my true self, which is residing outside of your reality."

"To be honest," Akari said, "what both of you said seems extremely outlandish."

"It does, doesn't it?" Dawn said and held out her hand. "Give me a sword."

That got raised eyebrows from Jason and Akari both.

"Are you sure?" Jason asked.

"Quite," Dawn said.

"I'm just asking because of that time I punched you so hard that you died."

Akari turned to give Jason a wide-eyed look.

"It's fine," Jason told her while gesturing at Dawn. "Look, she's fine."

"My new avatar can leverage my senses much better," Dawn said, giving Jason a flat look.

"In case I try to punch you in the face again?"

"I was more worried about Miss Hurin."

"Good call. Farrah definitely wants to take a swing too."

"Miss Asano," Dawn said. "Would it be accurate to say that you learn what you need to know about a person through their sword?"

"It would," Akari said.

"What does my sword tell you?" Jason asked.

"That you always make the outrageous choice, even when the simple one is better. That you overcomplicate everything and will often make two moves when all you need is one."

"Meaning that you're all flash and no bang," Dawn said.

"Hey," Jason complained. "What did I ever do to you?"

"You killed me."

"So what? I've died twice; you need to get over it."

"I truly hope you survive to diamond rank, Mr Asano. I am looking forward to you and I having a very different conversation."

"Are you going to kick my arse?"

"Across reality and back."

"Like Star Trek, except the warp drive is a sexy lady," Jason said with a creepy smile.

"You are disgusting," Akari told him.

Jason flashed her an impish grin.

"Give her a sword," he said.

"Are you certain?" Akari asked.

"It's fine. I already killed her, so how bad can it get with stun swords?"

Dawn gave Jason another flat look.

"Very well," Akari said. She moved to put the collar back on her neck but Dawn gestured for her to stop.

"It's fine," Dawn said.

Akari gave Dawn an assessing look, then nodded, handing the collars to Jason and the second sword to Dawn.

"It might be a little heavy."

"I'll manage," Dawn said, holding it in two hands.

The two women moved to the centre of the yard while Jason stood next to Shade.

"I would ask if you really needed to antagonise both women," Shade said, "but I have known you long enough at this point."

Jason responded only with a chuckle, then his face turned dark.

"What's the count?" he asked.

He had one of Shade's bodies keeping an eye on the Broken Hill death count as it was updated.

"Nine thousand confirmed, with an estimated total of twelve to fifteen thousand."

"Damn it."

"The survivor count came to over nineteen thousand," Shade said. "No small part of that is down to you."

"To us," Jason said. "Without your buses, that number would have been halved, easily."

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Akari watched Dawn, standing in front of her, sword held in both hands. Every sense she had told her that Dawn was a normal person but Jason had said she was anything but. Akari had learned that while Jason liked to lie frequently and transparently about inconsequential things, he was honest about the ones that mattered. As such, she didn't take the woman in front of her lightly.

With no collar, Akari opened by slamming both her aura and sword down at Dawn. She missed, without being entirely sure how. The fight that followed was the single most bewildering combat of Akari's life.

Dawn was slow and weak, yet she seemed to know every move Akari made, not just before she made it but before she even thought of it. Every action Akari took, Dawn and her sword were exactly where they needed to be, as if by coincidence.

Akari's silver-rank speed and strength massively outstripped the other woman, but Dawn was always in exactly the right spot, in exactly the right pose. She could not block, yet her sword deflected Akari's just enough to turn hits into hair's breadth misses. Akari felt as if she were trying to cut down the wind, her blade passing through the air again and again.

Dawn even managed to slip past Akari's defences to land hits, although the damage was negligible. The magic swords translated damage into a stunning effect, but Dawn's damage was so light it left Akari with barely a noticeable tingle.

Eventually, Akari made a mistake and Dawn's sword came up under her chin. Even that was not enough, only the rank of the sword allowing for a mild buzzing sensation in her jaw. Akari stopped anyway, stepping back and bowing deeply.

"I am a magical swordswoman," Akari said, "yet I cannot find any word that better describes your ability than supernatural. Will you teach me?"

"I will," Dawn said, "but that will have to wait. The time has come to discuss your true reason for coming to Australia."

Jason wandered over, looking Dawn up and down.

"You let me hit you, didn't you?"

"It was something you needed to get out of your system. I didn't think you would do it hard enough to kill me."

"Well, I had been drinking. And I really, really wanted to punch you in the face."

## Chapter 362

### Arms Race

Akari led Jason and Dawn into the clifftop house. What was remarkable about Asano Village's clifftop homes was that most of their space was underground, dug into solid rock. The underground portion then emerged from the cliff face with a glass wall offering views over the Pacific Ocean.

Without access to magic, the construction of the cliff houses would have been dangerous and the results unstable. Since magic was involved, it was simply impressive, which Jason was reminded of as he walked up to the glass wall in Akari's underground lounge room.

"This is nice," he said. "If I didn't already have a place, I'd definitely pick one of these."

"Where do you live, exactly?" Akari asked. "I thought it was in the main residence, but it's not, is it?"

"No," Jason said. "I have a little spot tucked away."

Jason turned from the window and they sat in the lounge chairs around a coffee table, although no one took out refreshments.

"As I stated outside," Dawn said to Akari, "the time has come for you to make plain your purpose in coming to Australia. Normally I would not have revealed as much as I have about myself to you, but you are the gateway to preparing for the next challenge this world will face."

"Meaning what, exactly?" Akari asked.

"Meaning that the Tiwari clan's guardianship is coming to an end."

"Tiwari?" Jason asked. "That's an Indian name, not a Japanese one."

"Yes," Akari said. "Centuries ago, the Network founder came to Japan, creating the secret societies that today are Japan's Network branches. The founder brought with him the Tiwari family. They were the guardians of an ancient object of incredible power and he brought them to Japan to keep it hidden. After centuries of intermarrying the locals, while the name and bloodline remain, they are, by any discernable measure, Japanese."

"What is this object?" Jason asked. "Dawn has been maddeningly vague."

"A door," Akari said. "No one is exactly sure where it leads, only that it is a world not our own. Further, when the door is moved, it opens to a new location. As best as anyone has been able to determine, wherever it is, it leads to an equivalent point in another world."

"Is it Farrah's world?" Jason asked Dawn.

"No," Dawn said. "In fact, Akari is incorrect. The door does not lead to another world, but a hidden aspect of this one. It gives access to the building blocks with which this universe was constructed."

"You're talking about the templates that the original Builder used," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn said. "The door is a tool for accessing the fundamental underpinnings of not just this reality but the other to which it is connected."

"And this place can be physically entered through this door? Is it some kind of sub-dimension?"

"The specifics are significantly above your current grasp of astral magic," Dawn said. "Sub-dimension is a sufficient explanation for now."

"That sounds like it would be dangerous to mess with," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn agreed. "Your world and your friend Farrah's have always been connected. They were built that way. That connection is woven into the fabric of your two realities. It causes echoes from one to the other."

"I noticed from the start that odd things seemed to work the same way in both worlds," Jason said. "Everything from the people of that world appearing in our legends to the way we keep time being identical."

"That is a factor of the resonance," Dawn said. "Echoes between worlds constructed on the same model, imprinting on one another."

"Which is how you get a lion-man named Gary, I suppose."

Akari was listening in silence. She quickly realised that she was being made privy to some of the greatest secrets that existed and while she was missing many of the specifics, she followed as best she could.

"Someone came to this world centuries ago," Dawn said. "They brought with them the door now in the Tiwari clan's possession. The connection between realities is a fabric that stretches across the universe. That door is a tool that can modify small portions of that fabric. On a universal scale, it can only affect a fragmentary space, but that is enough to strengthen the link between two connected points."

"Such as two versions of the same world," Jason said.

"Precisely."

"Why didn't you tell me any of this before now?" Jason asked.

"Because I did not know," Dawn said. "While you have been treating the symptoms of the problem at hand, I have been seeking the cause. The strands connecting the two realities lay thick across your universes. The strands connecting this planet, in this universe, to its equivalent in the other universe have been enhanced. It only affects the



area around this planet, although if the link is not returned to its natural state, there could be catastrophic knock-on effects as the fabric of the link begins to fray."

"I'm assuming that's a metaphor. Also that it's really bad."

"If this planet is lost, the rupture in this reality could potentially chain through your universe and cause it to collapse entirely. The other universe has a dimensional membrane supple enough to endure the backlash, but this one may not."

"So, the escalating magic is only here, on Earth," Jason said. "It's not affecting aliens and such, but if we lose the Earth, we may lose the universe."

"I have touched on this when we spoke in the past," Dawn said. "To return the link to its normal state, you must rectify the problems here, then return to the other reality and do so on the other side."

"Save the universe, no pressure. How do I do that, exactly?"

"The original connection between universes is an intrinsic element of the design by which the original Builder created both realities. When the templates on which it is based are made manifest, the components of that link are brought into physical being. The door is a tool that makes those templates manifest, allowing the collection of those components. Collect enough and the door can be used to modify the link."

"How exactly do you find this stuff out?" Jason asked. "Is there an online encyclopaedia for wizards or something? Is it subscription or can you just use a free account?"

"Do you know what an astral resonance imprint beacon is?" Dawn asked.

"It's kind of a recording probe, right?" Jason said. "It's sensitive to astral forces and if you're crazy good at understanding astral effects, you can interpret the readings."

"You've been studying your astral magic books," Dawn said.

"I've had to distract myself in my downtime somehow," Jason said. "Normally I'd cook, but there's all this rationing going on. If I'm following all of this correctly – which is a big if – then this magic door can rewrite the DNA of the universe."

"Very broadly speaking and on a very small scale, but something like that," Dawn acknowledged.

"Which means the Builder made this door, right? The current Builder. Unless there's someone else out there who can fiddle with reality on that level."

"There is not," Dawn said. "That being said, I believe that it was not a follower of the Builder who brought the door here, however. It was an outworlder, like you, but one who had entered the service of one of the other world's gods."

"Purity has been working with the Builder," Jason said.

"This person likely modified the link in the other reality first, then came here and did the same. This set in motion the magic siphoning from the other reality's version of this planet to this one. The impact was slight, at first, but it's been escalating. Over the last century and a half, that escalation has become precipitous, leading to a rise in the number and the strength of the proto-spaces being formed."

"The person who did all this," Jason said. "Is it the same one who built the grid and founded the Network?"

"I believe so."

"Why?"

"Balance," Dawn said. "The architect of this plan does not want the planet destroyed, at least not until they are done with it. They need it in place to soak up the magic that would normally accumulate around the other world until it triggered a magic surge."

"Which is why the grid never covered the ocean," Jason reasoned. "It was never intended to stop all the magic, just regulate it. The grid – and by extension, the Network – is a safety valve designed to keep things under control once the magic started building to dangerous levels."

"This was my conclusion as well," Dawn said. "The grid could have covered the oceans if the original designer had wanted it to do so. Giving the Network the tools to traverse aquatic environments and confront monsters there would certainly have been within their capabilities."

"We're still soaking up the magic from Pallimustus that would normally become a monster surge," Jason said. "Is that why the monster surges have been taking longer and longer?"

"Yes," Dawn said. "With how much magic Earth is siphoning right now, the monster surges have stopped altogether. They won't resume until the enhanced link to Earth is reduced to its original state, at least on this side of the link."

"They haven't had the surge yet?" Jason asked.

"No."

"That makes it something like fifteen years, now. They must be going nuts. And once we shut off the spigot on this end, won't they get the hum-dinger of all monster surges?"

"Yes. They have been on the cusp of a monster surge so long that once it happens, there will be an unprecedented breach in the dimensional membrane in the vicinity of their planet. This will allow the Builder's forces, which are already poised for an invasion, to come through with all the magical manifestations."

"I thought your boss and the Builder had a non-intervention deal. It feels a lot like he's still rummaging about in both worlds."

"That accord prohibits only direct intervention. It does not cover the use of mortal agents or events already set into motion."

"It sounds like he's already off to the races," Jason said. "That deal doesn't sound super-helpful."

"The deal more thoroughly prohibits intervention in your world. Even my involvement is pushing the boundary, even at a remove. If not for dimensional integrity being the direct purview of the World-Phoenix, I would not even be allowed this much."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I know you're here to help."

Jason grimaced.

"If I'm following this correctly," he said, "To save this world, I need to doom Farrah's world to an interdimensional invasion."

"If it makes you feel better, letting your world die would have the same effect," Dawn said. "It would just take longer."

"Great."

"You will need to rectify the enhanced link on this side first, which will at least slow down the damage to your world as it exposes the other. Then you must go there and resolve the link on the other side."

"You told us we'd have to go back."

"Yes," Dawn said. "At the time, I had discovered that the link would need to be adjusted at both ends. Now I know why and how."

"I need to go get the magic door."

"The door is only the beginning," Dawn said. "To use it to modify the link, you must do what was done when the link was first modified. Collect the elements of the link left behind by the original Builder in the templates on which your world was constructed. Gather enough and you can restore the link to its original state."

"Oh, a fetch quest, great. If I kill ten boars, do I get a green-quality spear?"

"Originally, you would use the door to give us access to those templates. Circumstances have changed."

"The EOA," Jason realised. "They plugged the safety valve. You said that when the grid went back up, there would be a magical backlash."

"Yes," Dawn said. "The templates, and the manifested link components within them, will start to appear randomly, reshaping your world. You will no longer require the door to access them, although it will still be necessary to rectify the link."

"Isn't that good, in a way?" Jason asked. "We should be able to gather these link components more easily."

"As will anyone else," Dawn said. "These components will be the most magically dense objects on your world. Do you think it is more likely that the magical factions come together for the greater good, or leap into a magical arms race?"

"Oh, crap."

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Jason and Dawn took the time to fill Akari in on at least the broad strokes of what she had heard. They didn't go into too much detail, just enough to give her a general understanding of what was happening and what was at stake.

"You need me to convince the Tiwari to give you the door," she said.

"Yes," Jason said. "What I don't understand is what led to you coming here. I think we can safely put aside the pretence of assessing the worthiness of my family."

"That is not as much pretence as you may think," Akari said. "We take the honour of our name seriously."

"Well I have to save the universe, so let's put that aside for right now. Why are you here?"

"The founder left the Tiwari clan with a prophecy," Akari said. "When monsters walked the world, a man of two worlds would close the door forever. They believe that man is you. Given your name, they came to us in the hope of approaching you. We have been Network allies for many years, but the revelation of the door and the clan's origin was news to us. I was sent to assess not your clan, but you. To see if you could be trusted with this secret."

"Which obviously I can, because I'm terrific."

"You are a hard person to like," Akari said.

"I have to assume that's another level of control," Jason said. "If they wanted to shut the link down once it had served its purpose, the person most likely to have the ability and knowledge would be an outworlder."

"Yes," Dawn said. "The conditions for an outworlder to be sucked between worlds rather than simply annihilated are quite specific but with the link in the state it is in, those conditions being met somewhere in your world were an inevitability."

"Are you sure?" Jason asked. "Seems like bit of a gamble."

"A gamble one might be willing to make if they were willing to live with your world being destroyed if it didn't pay off. Or perhaps they were relying on forces recognising the danger and taking steps to rectify it. The goddess of Knowledge gave you a trove of astral

magic knowledge to take home. The World-Phoenix made sure you would get there. I don't think the Builder was happy that you were the agent the World-Phoenix chose, but it seems likely in hindsight that he did anticipate her actions."

"Meaning your boss got played," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn said. "The Builder, for all his seeming short-sightedness and frustration, seems to be getting everything he wants. Even you, saving your world, serves him by setting in motion his invasion of Pallimustus. The bargain that keeps him from intervening in this world limits the World-Phoenix's ability to act against him, now."

"You're telling me that getting obsessed with me was all an act?"

"Probably not," Dawn said. "I suspect that obsession was inherited from his vessel. As it served to mask his true intentions, it could be that he deliberately inhabited a vessel that would make him appear foolish. Or it could be happenstance."

"So, what now?" Jason asked Dawn. "We go to Japan and take this door?"

"First, warn the Network about the template manifestations. There is no telling exactly what will happen but there will hopefully be a need for large-scale evacuations."

"Hopefully?" Jason asked.

"As opposed to people being dissolved into nothingness as the reality around them is reshaped."

"Yeah, that would be bad," Jason said.

"Next, we need to collect the door," Dawn said. "It needs to be in your possession before the templates begin to manifest. If the magic factions discover it and learn what it can do, they will start fighting over it."

Jason and Dawn both turned to Akari.

"What?" Akari asked.

"Are you going to warn your people about how important the door is?" Jason asked. "If they know, then they will extort everything they can for it."

"Only a few members of the Asano clan know of this and they will act with honour," Akari insisted.

"And what about the Tiwari clan?" Jason asked. "Will they share your unflinching honour?"

Akari frowned.

"I would like to think so," she said, "but I cannot speak for them."

"I'd like to get in a room with that EOA defector at some point, as well," Jason said. "I want to know where they're getting the Builder's clockwork cores from."

"That doesn't matter at the moment," Dawn said. "You don't have time to visit the United States. There are now larger concerns at play than the Engineers of Ascension."

## Chapter 363

### Sword-Fighting With No Shirt On

“I know Broken Hill must have been rough,” Ketevan said, meeting Jason in her office.

“Not as rough as it was for the people who lived there,” Jason said.

“Even so, I understand if you need to take some time before getting back into action. That being said, if you are up to it, we could always use you.”

“Actually, I came in to tell you that I need some time away from Network activity. Also, a flight to Japan and back would be good. With air travel restricted I can't just go buy a ticket. I could use Shade, but until I catch him in rank that would leave me shovelling coins into him like an old-timey train driver.”

“Japan?” Ketevan asked. “Is this a family thing? Something to do with Akari? She's been doing some impressive work for us, helping to shut down proto-spaces and clear dimensional entity waves. We can manage without you, but losing you both at this point will make a dent in our capabilities, I won't lie.”

“It's a larger concern than family,” Jason said. “We need to have a meeting. You, me, Anna and Farrah to start with. It's about preparing for what happens when the grid comes back up.”

“We've been holding discussions about what happens following the grid-reactivation since it first went down.”

“Those plans are going to need revising.”

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“I shouldn't have agreed to this,” Jason said as Kaito flew him and Farrah back towards Asano village. They were in the cockpit, catching a ride as Kaito moved a load of supplies north for Network ritualist teams. “I should have pushed the issue and had us on a plane to Japan already.”

“I don't think you realise how much attention is on you now,” Kaito said. “They're saying that Broken Hill is the fifth-largest loss of life from a single incident since that start of the monster waves. There's been nothing else on TV. Interviews with survivors, footage from the evacuation. Every channel has you taking out monsters and shoving people onto buses.”

“Footage from your drones,” Jason said.

“Don't look at me,” Kaito said. “That was Terrance.”

The cockpit seats had a two-by-two configuration, with Kaito and Farrah in the front seats. Jason was in one of the rear seats, with Terrance in the other.

“You should see the tracking data for your online footprint,” Terrance said. “There’s enough footage and interviews that people are doing deep-dive analysis of your performance vs. the League of Heroes. They went after the big monsters while you worked on helping people, which did not go unnoticed. I made very sure of that.”

“I’m so glad that all those dead people were good for your optics,” Jason snarled.

Farrah turned around in her seat, patting Jason on the arm. When he first arrived back on Earth, his anger would have let his aura loose. Months of renewed training let him keep it under control.

“I sympathise with those poor people, of course,” Terrance said, “but we need to strike while the iron is hot. The press has been wanting access to interview you for months and now is a perfect time. After Broken Hill...”

Terrance trailed off as Jason turned a withering stare on him. He didn’t lose control of his aura, instead, he used it with pinpoint efficiency. Terrance had never sensed Jason’s aura before but now he felt it like an icicle spike, pressing into his throat.

“If I hear the phrase ‘thoughts and prayers’ pass your lips,” Jason said coldly, “you will not like what happens next.”

“Of course,” Terrance said with a visible gulp. “Obviously the press will be instructed to be sensitive about it.”

Jason had agreed to participate in a press day while the Network prepared to send him to Japan. More than just arranging a plane, there were diplomatic issues with Japan’s Network branches and even the Japanese government. Jason had become a figure of prominence and, more importantly, power. If he wanted to move openly, it involved obtaining government permission; there was a level of nervousness engendered when a one-man army applied for a visa.

“How is this press day of yours going to play out?” Jason asked Terrance.

“We already have some selected press en route to Asano Village,” Terrance said.

“They get vetted at the gate,” Farrah said. “By me.”

“That’s fine,” Terrance said. “In fact, if you could make the magic as overt as possible, that would work nicely. Then you, Jason, give them a little tour. Your sister will make an appearance. A celebrity chef talking about rationing, making it clear that there’s no special treatment.”

“There’s lots of special treatment,” Kaito said.



“The idea is to make it feel like there isn't,” Jason explained. “Our people really are rationing, so there's no catching us out on that.”

“Make sure you go through the medical centre as well. Let them talk to your brother-in-law and that Doctors Without Borders lady you brought back from Africa.”

“She brought herself from France,” Jason said.

“Don't care. I want sound bites for Doctors without Borders, Africa and Ebola. I want to hear the phrase 'experience with handling a crisis,' on every nightly news program. I want interviews with the people being treated talking about how grateful they are.”

The Asano Village Medical Centre was well staffed and well-stocked, so the Asano family had offered it up to the Network as a medical way station for those suffering exotic attacks that couldn't be resolved by the people in the field. Many of the strange poisons and diseases monsters inflicted were easily remedied by Jason if he was on site.

“You're sure they'll say what you want them to?” Kaito asked.

“Very,” Terrance said. “After the tour you're going to do sit-downs with all of them, followed by one in-depth interview.”

“With who?” Jason asked.

“Jeremy Westin,” Terrance said. “He's independent but a friendly, and he's the only member of the press who has been inside the village before.”

“Fine,” Jason said. “What's the tone we're going for? Sober in the face of current circumstances but with enough lightness for a humanising touch?”

“That's exactly what we want,” Terrance said. “They're going to ask you about the League of Heroes, too.”

“How do you want me to approach that?”

“Respect and solidarity while undercutting them with backhanded compliments.”

“You want me to neg them.”

“Yes, but don't go after the League of Heroes directly. Shining a light on the EOA itself works much better. Highlight the EOA as the organisation behind them, inferring that the league is a puppet organisation.”

“They are, so it shouldn't be hard. Point out the shiny fruit of the league while letting people see the rotten tree they're growing on.”

“To help with that, I've set up a video chat with the EOA defector in the US before you meet with the reporters. It should give you some ammunition.”

“Yeah? Thanks, Terry. I genuinely appreciate that.”

“Enough to consider how we introduce you to the press?”

“No. I do not practise sword-fighting with no shirt on.”

“It'd be a great visual. Pouring a bottle of water over yourself after working up a sweat.”

“I don't sweat.”

“You don't sweat?”

“No.”

“We could make it look like you sweat. I could rub oil on you.”

“You know, I thought it was strange when your sister gave me the number for the Network's human resources department. Now I get it.”

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The Network office in Asano Village was not large but did include a secure communications room. One of the few areas in which Earth magical development outpaced that of Pallimustus was in communications, due to incorporating magic and technology together. As a security specialist set up the secure link with the Network branch in Arizona, Jason and Asya were in the main office area, leaning side-by-side against a desk. Between them, their hands gently touched.

“We haven't had a lot of alone time over the last couple of months,” she said. “I can't help but think I moved a little too slow.”

“Seizing the moments when you have them can be important,” Jason agreed.

“How are you?” she asked softly. “Have you even slept since Broken Hill?”

“Not yet,” he said.

Broken Hill had only been the day before. After hours of speaking with survivors in between debriefs at the evacuation camp, he hadn't gotten home until first light. Then Dawn arrived and they spoke with Akari before he portalled to Sydney mid-morning. Now it was late into the afternoon and soon the press would be arriving.

“You need to take some time,” she said. “I know you aren't as fine as you make out.”

“Oh, so you're interested me making-out, are you?”

“Time and place, Asano,” she said, a smile teasing the corner of her lips. “This is a professional environment.”

“Oh, I wouldn't call myself a making-out professional. I'm more of a gifted amateur.”

“Gifted, are you?”

“Well, enthusiastic, at the very least.”

“There is something to be said for keenness.”

“I have a whole book on sex magic.”

“You what?”

“Farrah gave it to me. Kind of.”

“She *what?*”

“Uh... it's not what it sounds like.”

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The woman on the screen looked around Jason's age, although he knew that was not the case. From what he had heard from Asya, Audrey Blaine, the EOA defector, inhabited an artificially constructed body. The result of some shady EOA/Cabal/Network joint research program from years ago, she was forced into it to save her life after the EOA killed her off for refusing to go along with the plans that subsequently killed hundreds of thousands around the world.

A mothballed reincarnation program from years ago, it had been a gamble at best. The body that had been pickled in a jar for well over a decade was apparently not without quirks. The Network was still trying to figure out exactly what she was and what she could do.

In the meantime, Audrey was being kept under comfortable but thorough guard as she coughed up the EOA's secrets. There was no question that the EOA knew about her revival by this stage and would kill her all over again if given the chance.

“It seems that you and I are in a very small club, Ms Blaine,” Jason said, by way of introduction. “Not many people come back from the dead.”

“I've heard that you claimed to have died,” she said. “Your companion that Adrien Barbou was holding in France, too. How did you manage to revive?”

“Oh, various means,” Jason said. “A friend of mine's dad rules the afterlife but he refuses to help me out, so I've been making other arrangements. Barbou really is with the EOA, then?”

“Yes, and he's very much in the ascendant. You know that he was playing with you in France, right? Exposing our people so you thought the EOA's objective was the astral space and your outworlder friends, while our larger plan came to fruition.”

“You mean their larger plan,” Jason said. “You're not EOA anymore, right?”

“Old habits.”

“I did realise that I was a cat chasing a string,” Jason said, “but only in hindsight.”

“For such a stealthy man, you are very loud, Mr Asano. You make a useful distraction. I understand you're looking for some juicy nuggets to use against my former organisation in the press.”

“Yes, but that is a secondary concern.”

“Oh?”

“Tell me about the implants being used in the silver-rank converted.”

“The what?”

“The superheroes.”

“Oh, the category three enhanced. You want to know what the implants are.”

“I know what the implants are,” Jason said. “I want to know where you got them.”

“You know what they are, do you?” she asked, scepticism plain on her face and in her voice.

“Clockwork cores,” he said. “they are produced by artificial life forms called clockwork kings, which are themselves created by an entity called the Builder. We don't get along.”

“Clockwork king,” Audrey said thoughtfully. “Is that what it's called? It was dug up in the eighties, buried with a bunch of Assyrian relics more than two millennia old. The archaeologists thought they'd found an alien robot. It took decades before we figured out how to get anything out of it. Part of a joint program with the Cabal and the Network to advance our various research projects. That was the beginning of the human enhancement project, although we were never able to use the implants – clockwork cores, you called them? We were never able to use them properly until we advanced the other aspects of our enhancement program. We didn't get them to category three until around two years ago, at which point we were able to properly integrate the implants. It solved a lot of issues with the earlier iterations.”

“The EOA isn't in contact with the Builder, then?”

“I don't know who that is. If whoever or whatever that is has any involvement with the EOA, then I suspect only Mr North would know. He's the oldest of the EOA's leaders and I'm not exactly sure what he is. I don't think he's human, at least, not entirely. Of course, neither am I, anymore.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Tell me more about this enhancement program.”

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“I have to go,” Asya told Jason as he emerged from the secure communications room. “I'm crewing your brother's helicopter again.”

“I'm going to be busy,” he said. “I may not see you for a while.”

“Aren't we all?” she asked sadly.

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The loons outside the gate knew something was going on, becoming riled up with the arrival of each additional news crew. Security let the press through the gate so as not to be harassed by the people outside it but they were told to wait until all seven crews arrived. They got out of their vans to film B-roll and establishing shots of the gate, the mirrored security room and the people of the other side of the gate causing a ruckus.

"It's actually not glass," the security guard explained after being talked into an interview. "The whole building is made from an aluminium-based ceramic, along with some magic, but I don't know how that works."

"You're not well-versed in magic?" the reporter asked.

"I don't even have any essences," the guard said.

"Essences?" the reporter asked.

"Oh," the guard said, looking stricken. "I don't think I was meant to say that."

"It's fine, Toby," Jason said, having arrived unnoticed in the midst of the reporters. "I'll take it from here."

"Sorry, Jason," Toby said as he slunk back to the security room.

The reporters all turned on Jason, who was wearing a light, casual shirt and slacks. The camera people stopped filming the guard and B-roll to focus on Jason as well.

"Essences are the source of the powers possessed by members of the Global Defence Network," Jason said. "I'm not, strictly-speaking a member, but my powers also come from essences."

He plucked a green cube from the air and handed it to one of the reporters crowding around him.

"You might say that essences are the natural form of magic. Human beings are actually inherently connected to magic of this type, developing powers in symbiosis with these essences when absorbing them."

The reporter stared at the object in her hands.

"Are you saying that anyone can gain superpowers if they have one of these?"

"Ideally, you'll have three," Jason explained. "Absorbing essences is an easy and actually quite exhilarating experience. You can look at it as the natural method of obtaining powers, without the time-consuming and invasive procedures of the human conversion process that the EOA uses."

"The EOA?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Jason said. "Once you get deeply involved in all this, it's easy to forget that the magic societies aren't common knowledge. The EOA are the Engineers of Ascension, which is the organisation behind the League of Heroes. I understand that the name comes from the desire to modify the human race to gain power - which they've done very well at, if the league is anything to go by."

"Then your powers come from an entirely different source?"

"Oh, goodness, yes," Jason said with a light laugh. "The EOA have spent decades overcoming the flaws in their human modification program, for which you have to admire

their dedication. Most would look at the price of progress and give up under the accusations of playing God but they were unflinching in their resolve. Today, they hardly lose anyone to the process, and without it, we wouldn't have the League of Heroes we see today.”

“Where do these essences come from?” one of the reporters asked as they passed the plant essence around.

“We can talk about that as we head into the village proper,” Jason suggested as darkness flooded out of his shadow to take the form of a bus.

After the footage of Broken Hill was broadcast everywhere, Shade's sleek, bus form was intimately familiar to professional media personnel like the news crew. Although Jason said nothing about it, and indeed, they had been warned that it was a delicate topic, the bus invoked memories of Jason's actions during the disaster.

“Before we hop aboard, we do need to do a quick security check,” Jason said. “My friend Farrah, whom you can see approaching, will be responsible for that.”

The reporters looked around, not spotting anyone. Jason casually pointed up and the reporters followed with their gaze to see a woman descending from the sky with wings of fire. The reporters nudged their crews to aim the cameras upward.

## Chapter 364

### Candid and Authentic

Emi and Akari had arrived together in the main thoroughfare of the village, where Jason and Erika were speaking with one of the reporters. Akari was the one due to be interviewed, but the reporter had been waylaid.

"That story you did last November on mining deregulation was an exercise in buffoonery," Emi said. "I don't even think you're a corporate shill; you're just gullible. Have you even seen the foreign ownership statistics or do you only look at press releases and regurgitate them like a mother bird?"

"Look, Little Miss," the reporter said, "clearly you've—"

"Little Miss?" Emi asked, nostrils flaring. "At least I have the decency use a person's name, *Mr Denier*. Do I look like the protagonist of a book written by a nice English lady in the fifties?"

"Now that you say it," Jason said, earning him a glare that had him holding his hands up in surrender.

"Emi..." Erika said with the disapproving tone only a mother can truly master.

"What?" Emi asked. "You want me to ignore the fact that this guy is facilitating foreign interests selling our country's mineral wealth to other foreign interests while paying roughly the same tax as a guy cutting keys in a booth at the shopping centre?"

"That's rather an oversimplification," the reporter, Denier, said.

"Which is necessary with someone who is obviously simple," Emi shot back. "You'll probably be on TV tomorrow describing the EOA putting weird alien implants inside people to stop them from going insane when they cut them open to carve magic runes on their skeletons as a good idea. I'll have to tune in and watch, so which network were you from? The Wrong Side of History Channel?"

"Emi," Erika said. "Isn't it time for you to go to Coffs Harbour and make sure there aren't any monster waves coming?"

"Fine," she grumbled. "I'll go find Uncle Kaito."

"Feel free to edit that out," Jason said as they watched Emi stomp off in the direction of the main residence.

"She's a pistol, no mistake, but she can go off on political rants when she may or may not have all the facts at hand. No idea where she gets it from."

"Wait," Denier said. "Is she really the one making sure that no monsters invade Coffs Harbour?"

"How's your dimensional membrane protrusion precursor analysis theory, Mr Denier?" Jason asked.

"My what?"

"That's what I thought. When you're better at magic than my niece, feel free to question her credentials. Until then, how about we stick to qualified opinions?"

"NOT REALLY HIS AREA!" Emi shouted from the steps of the house.

"That's enough out of you!" Jason yelled back at her. She stuck out her tongue in response and he did the same.

"I see you are as vigilant as ever about the dignity of the Asano name," Akari observed dryly.

"I didn't pull out my apocalypse beast, did I?" Jason asked. "And he loves meeting new people. But also, eating new people, so..."

"Did you just say apocalypse beast?" Denier asked.

"What?" Jason asked. "No idea what you're talking about. Let's go take a look at the medical centre and you can talk with Akari along the way."

"That would be good," Denier said as Jason led the way. "Miss Asano, as a relative outsider, here, how have you found living with your Australian relatives?"

Akari cast a glance at Jason.

"Challenging."

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Erika, being the experienced media personality, had taken to attaching herself to the tour. She wanted to at least reel in her brother's impulsive nature, which was going roughly as well as expected. As the reporters interviewed people at the medical centre, she leaned close to Jason.

"You did tell Craig and his anaemic friends to stay inside today, right?" she whispered.

"Of course," Jason said.

Vermillion had been unhappy about giving up his country mansion but turned out to be quite satisfied with one of the clifftop houses. Since it was not practical to keep shuffling blood donors up from Sydney, he had a sufficient retinue living with him to keep him fed, although he, too, was rationing.

The Cabal was keeping very quiet in Australia but in other parts of the world, they were more active. Individual factions were assisting against the monster waves in places like Siberia and the South Pacific where the Network were at their least influential and spread the thinnest. Having Vermillion present gave Jason a line on Cabal activity, and



while it didn't impact his activities for the moment, if the Cabal became a flashpoint then he had the inside line.

Ian came over and kissed his wife.

"Any idea when the circus is going to shuffle out?" he asked. "We need to get these people ready to transport."

"I think Terrance is around here somewhere," Jason said. "He's on press-wrangling duty, so I'll go find him to play bad-guy and kick them out."

"Actually, could you go do that, Honey?" Ian asked. "Some of the patients wanted to meet Jason and I thought that might look good for the cameras."

"Why would they want to meet me?" Jason asked.

"Because you're the hero of Broken Hill."

"No, I'm not!"

Jason's raised voice caused the attention of the reporters.

"I do not want to hear that phrase spread around," Jason said, his voice low and fierce.

"You don't always get to choose," Erika told him.

After leaving the medical centre, Jason led the reporters back to the main thoroughfare where Taika was standing in front of a series of vehicles, looking self-satisfied.

"What is going on?" Jason asked.

"Team Knight Rider," Taika said. "It's sweet, right?"

"No, it isn't. Shade, why would you even participate in this? Most of these vehicles aren't even black."

"I know," one of the cars said unhappily. "I lost a bet."

Jason put a hand over his eye and let out a groan before looking over at the camera crews who were still filming everything.

"Did you really have to do this today?" Jason asked Taika.

"A bet's a bet, bro," Taika said, handing Jason his phone. "Take my photo."

"I don't think that's necessary," Shade said. "I'm certain that Mr Asano requires my services in some capacity."

"No, I'm taking the photo," Jason said. "A bet is a bet; he's not wrong."

"This is all very undignified," Shade said.

Jason took the photo and handed Taika back the phone.

"Okay, Shade. Knock that off and come give these nice reporters an interview."

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"You have been an enigmatic figure for some time now," Jeremy Westin said. He and Jason were sitting comfortably, facing one another in the lounge of the main residence of Asano Village. The sun had long since set and the other reporters were gone. Along with Jason and Jeremy were the cameraman, Terrance, and Erika.

"Are you looking to lift the veil of mystery, Mr Westin?" Jason asked.

"I imagine you'll still have no shortage of secrets when we're done, Mr Asano. I'd like to start by going through some background and then what the public has seen of you, from your perspective. As you might imagine, there has been no small amount of inquiry into your background. Until just a few years ago, you were a relatively ordinary person, with an ordinary job. The most unusual thing about you was your occasional appearances on your sister's cooking program."

"I did see the interview with my old boss, Sadiq," Jason said. "That part where he was cranky about me not giving notice once he found out I was alive was classic Sadiq. Someone should make a workplace sitcom about that guy."

"That brings us to the key point," Jeremy said. "Your disappearance and apparent demise. The destruction of your apartment and the subsequent cover-up. Then you're gone, presumed dead, for a year and a half. You come back ten months ago and immediately we get the first appearance of the Starlight Angel, or Starlight Rider. Do you have a preference for either moniker?"

"Jason's fine. If you really insist then I prefer to avoid the religious connotations."

"Yet, that does seem to be a problem for you. You have been hailed as the messenger of God and Satan both."

"Jeremy, I'm not interested in telling anyone what they should or shouldn't believe," Jason said, prompting a startled cough from Erika.

"Sister, dear," Jason said. "You're a professional. I think you know better than to step on the audio."

"Sorry," she said. "I thought I heard a bull defecating."

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Terrance paced back and forth. He was in the main residence with Erika, Farrah and Jason.

"What the hell is Team Knight Rider?" he asked.

"It's a TV show from 1997 that got cancelled after one season," Jason said.

"Why did you stage that scene? You did stage it, right? You didn't just lead a bunch of reporters into the middle of your farcical personal life."

"Of course I staged it," Jason said. "You think Shade goes around making dodgy bets? You wanted humanising. A little unexpected weirdness feels candid and authentic. If something or someone comes across as too polished and too perfect, people react negatively. I'm sure you know that better than me."

"I'm fairly sure you had not perfect covered. What was that thing with your niece?"

"That was entirely her," Jason said.

"Seriously, mining deregulation?"

"What do you want me to say?" Jason asked. "Contemporary youth are showing an increased level of political engagement."

"And that bit about the EOA and alien implants?" Erika asked.

"Okay, it was mostly her," Jason admitted.

"That girl is a menace," Terrance said.

"Did you just call my daughter a menace?" Erika asked.

"Your daughter is—"

"...an unabashed delight," Jason interrupted, completing his sentence before the man finished digging a shallow grave. "She also has a doting uncle who gets very cranky when people say bad things about her. An uncle who, on an unrelated note, has killed dozens of people."

"You've killed dozens of people?" Terrance asked.

"I downplayed the number when they asked me about it in the interviews," Jason said.

"Why do people keep threatening me with violence?" Terrance complained, looking at Jason. "They don't threaten you."

"Did you not hear what I just said about the dozens of people? Everyone who has threatened me is either dead or a god-like being from beyond reality. Or had their power stripped by an invasive procedure. Oh, or had their soul devoured by one of those god-like beings I just mentioned. That was a rough way to go, but I wasn't directly involved. Actually, there is one guy who wound up fine. His name's Jerrick and I almost killed him but I kept him alive for evidence on this thing I was working on. Then there was a political cover-up and he lost his job but he's doing alright. Even helped me out one time when my soul was being tortured, because of the time I didn't kill him. There were these other guys I killed in a shopping arcade while I was bringing him back and I think it left an impression. They gave him his job back for that. Helping me, I mean, not watching me kill a bunch of people."

"Uh..." Terrance said.

"Invasive procedure?" Farrah asked. "Are you talking about skeletal suppression?"

"Yep," Jason said.

Farrah noticed the confused expressions on Erika and Terrance.

"It's a similar process to what the EOA apparently does as part of their enhancement process," she explained. "They cut you open and carve magic right onto your skeleton, except, instead of giving you powers, they enchant suppression collar magic right onto your bones. Assuming you survive, it permanently suppresses all your magical abilities."

"That sounds horrifying," Erika said.

"It's not used very often," Farrah said. "Normally, if you've done something bad enough to warrant it, they just execute you."

"Even in Farrah's world it's considered ethically sketchy, and that's saying something," Jason said.

"Are you saying that my world is immoral?" Farrah asked.

"Every time I killed people I got rewarded," Jason said.

"That means you were killing the right people," Farrah told him. "I thought you moved past this kind of thing."

"I don't ever want him to move past that kind of thing," Erika cut in. "If he becomes a remorseless killer, he's not really himself any more, is he?"

"That's true," Farrah acknowledged. "Who did they do skeletal suppression to?"

"Lucian Lamprey," Jason said.

"The Director of the Magic Society?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "He helped that crime boss to kidnap me."

"You didn't mention that in your recordings."

"It wasn't exactly the best time for me."

"That's understandable."

Terrance moved next to Erika.

"How much of this are you following?" he asked.

"It's best not to try with Jason. Just let him run around, nod occasionally and wait for him to tire himself out."

"Like a toddler."

"Yep."

"I don't suppose you know how to get your brothers into some kind of water fight?"

Erika turned to give Terrance a flat look.

"I had to ask," he said.

"It's time for me to get out of here," Jason said. "I have a plane to catch."

"Get a good night's sleep first," Erika said. "The plane will wait for you. I know you have magic stamina or whatever but you still haven't slept since Broken Hill. Your amiable façade is getting a little pasted on."

"My amiable façade is fine."

"You just explained to your publicity guy how all the people that crossed you died horribly. Now he thinks that if he's mean to your niece you're going to kill him and bury him out in the bush."

"That's not really what I was thinking," Terrance said. "I am now, though."

"Don't be ridiculous," Jason said. "I wouldn't bury him out in the bush. I'd feed him to Colin."

"You didn't show Colin to the reporters, did you?" Farrah asked.

"Of course not; you know what Colin's like. He's super friendly but also a terrifying apocalypse monster that feeds on blood and flesh."

"What about Terrance's bones?" Erika asked.

"Colin's a little trooper, so I'm sure he'd manage," Jason said. "He's got all those teeth, remember?"

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Jason forewent his semi-sleep trance for actual slumber. With Farrah nearby and secure in his hidden, underwater cloud house, he was able to let go of his defensiveness and get some genuine rest. He had been half-expecting nightmares but mental exhaustion won out. In the morning he called to say he was ready for the plane and meditated while it was prepared.

After Broken Hill, Jason's meditation pushed his abilities closer to the precipice of silver, with two of them tipping right over. The ability that allowed him to shadow teleport and open portals, Path of Shadows, crossed the threshold to silver. He could now portal a silver ranker, albeit only one, and his range immediately doubled from four-hundred kilometres to eight-hundred. On the downside, portals beyond the bronze-range of four-hundred kilometres increased the cooldown from ten minutes to an hour, although after ten minutes he would once again be able to portal at the shorter range.

His other ability was his aura, Hegemony. Already possessing a terrifying strength, it now reached new heights of potency. It also gained new effects with its new rank, one extremely useful and one much more niche.

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Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (holy, unholy).
  - Base cost: None.
  - Cooldown: None.
  
  - Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are suffering from.
  
  - Effect (bronze): Inflicts an instance of [Sin] on enemies that make physical or magical attacks against allies within the aura. Instances applied in this way cannot be resisted.
  
  - Effect (silver): Aura can be extended over a larger area before aura strength becomes compromised. Transcendent damage dealt by enemies within the aura is downgraded to either resonating-force or disruptive-force damage, depending on the source.
  
  - Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached silver rank.
- 

Transcendent damage was rare below silver rank, Jason being unusual in that regard. Although it was an effect that would rarely see use, it could prove critical. One of the known properties of transcendent damage was that complete annihilation of the physical body would prevent most resurrection effects. Since such a revival ability was now one of Jason's trump cards, the prospect of transcendent damage negating it was a sizeable threat. Now, so long as his prodigious aura was not suppressed, that threat was neutralised.

Farrah had spent most of her time in Sydney and was happy to stay in a cloud bed once again. They had both slept until late morning, after which Jason was finally able to return Farrah to Sydney via portal, although she alone was the portal's limit. He had previously attempted to portal himself while Farrah resided in his spirit vault, but the portal had collapsed in the attempt.

Feeling buoyed by his new gains, when the call came to tell him the plane was ready, he cheerfully sought out Akari and Dawn in their clifftop house. Dawn immediately noticed the changes in Jason, congratulating him on his advancements.

Jason opened another portal direct to the Network's hangar at Bankstown airport, where they found Asya and Michael Aram waiting for them, along with Akari. As portalling

the silver-ranker consumed all the portal's capacity, he sent her first while he and Dawn followed after waiting out the ten minute cooldown.

"Seeing us off?" Jason asked.

"Tagging along," Asya said. "Akari is a member of the Kobe branch, while Dawn and yourself aren't network members at all. Michael is representing the Sydney branch and me, the International Committee."

"I hope this flight goes better than our last one together," Jason said, shaking Aram's hand.

"We've had the plane very thoroughly checked," Aram said, "but I'll be relying on you to save me again if things go awry."

"We're also here to help things go smoothly from a diplomatic perspective," Asya said. "We've prepared a gift for when you meet Akari's father, the clan head."

"Thank you, but I'm comfortable with the gift I've prepared," Jason said.

"May I ask what you've chosen?"

"Just a couple of things I picked up along the way," Jason said.

"He refuses to tell me," Akari said.

"It's a surprise," Jason said.

"I am deeply concerned," Akari said, getting a laugh from Asya.

"Uh oh," Jason said. "I think they're teaming up. Mike – can I call you Mike? – I think we need to form a man alliance."

Jason threw an arm around Aram's shoulders and started leading him toward the plane.

"We can do manly men things, like talk about trucks."

"Um, I don't know anything about trucks," Aram said.

"Me either," Jason confessed. "Or fishing. Are you a fishing guy?"

"I'm more of a theatre guy."

"Yeah? I saw a great production of Wicked Sisters at the Seymour Centre just before the monster waves started."

"In the Reginald Theatre? I saw that too. It really was good."

Still with one arm slung over Aram's shoulders as they headed for the plane, Jason used his other arm to punch the air triumphantly.

"Manliness!"

## Chapter 365

### Warmth and Levity

As the plane flew north over Queensland, Asya looked to where Jason was sitting on the floor, meditating, as he had been since reaching cruising altitude. Akari stepped up next to her.

“I know he seems frivolous,” she said, “but I've discovered that he devotes much of his inactive time to training. His diligence in that regard surprises even me, and I was raised in a life of training.”

“I rejected cores because I wanted to learn the right way,” Asya said, “but I have other responsibilities. I've been through the tactical training program but crewing Kaito's helicopter hasn't given me the chance to confront monsters that I need. I see people who gained their essences long after me hitting category two because they use cores. I'm the only one on the flight crew still category one.”

“There is no shame in using monster cores to grow,” Akari said. “The danger is in letting them be the only source of your strength. You must be vigilant that you do not let your capability flounder and make sure that you grow not just your essence abilities but your mastery of them.”

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you,” Asya said. “You're a core user and so much stronger than me.”

“I understand,” Akari said. “Like you, I have seen core users whose skill fails their power. There are more of them than there are of those who reach their potential. The training programs Miss Hurin instituted have been helping but you can't turn a culture of decades around overnight.”

“The current crisis is finally showing people what Jason and Farrah said from the beginning,” Asya said. “Of course, not everyone needed teaching. Finding out just how many of the American network members don't use cores has been revelatory.”

The monster wave crisis had every Network branch pulling out all the stops, and with that came the revelation that the US and the Chinese had been using some variation of Farrah's training program for as much as a century. They had inserted themselves into her instruction programs not to learn but to refine their techniques.

This was paying off as China and the United States demonstrated that, like Jason and Farrah, they had people capable of operating independently of teams. They avoided it where possible but in emergency situations, they could deploy people capable of facing groups of monsters alone. Both countries had silver-rankers who were not the failures



Jason had so far encountered but were clearly around his level of skill. Given that they were also a rank higher, they were also demonstrably stronger. Some were even powerhouses on the level of Farrah.

Jason had become something of the face of magic internationally, but both China and the United States were pushing their own people. They weren't the only ones, but they were having the most success, courtesy of powerful rosters of essence users. This meant that, like Jason, they could overshadow the generic supers put forward by the League of Heroes.

Jason had been asked about his US and Chinese counterparts during his interviews, where he openly stated that many of them were more powerful than him. It was another tool he used to highlight the legitimacy of the Network over the EOA.

The two women felt a surge of magic come from Jason, who was still consolidating his development from the long, desperate intensity of the Broken Hill battle. He opened his eyes, which were sparkling with triumph.

"I'm so close to silver I can taste it," he said.

"Another ability reached category three?" Akari asked.

"My cloak. Combining it with Shade's bus form really gave it a workout."

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#### Ability: [Cloak of Night] (Dark)

- Conjunction (darkness, light, dimension).
- Base cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Conjures a magical cloak that offers limited physical protection. Can generate light over an area or absorb light to blend into shadows. Cloak can reduce the weight of the wearer, allowing reduced falling speed and water walking. Cannot be given or taken away, but the effect can be extended to others in close proximity, with an ongoing mana cost rising exponentially with each affected person.
  
- Effect (bronze): Cloak reflexively intercepts projectiles. Highly effective against rapid, weaker attacks, but less effective against powerful, singular attacks. Cloak allows gliding.
  
- Effect (silver): Cloak passively manipulates physical space, slightly shifting the trajectory of incoming attacks. Manipulation can be actively managed for more directed effect or to allow passage through spaces normally too small to physically traverse. Cloak allows flight for a low ongoing mana cost, increasing to a moderate ongoing mana cost while in direct sunlight.

- Ability [Cloak of Night] (Dark) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached silver rank.
- 

Looking over his upgraded ability, Jason noted that the wording had changed from earlier iterations of the ability. Partly that was due to mana costs for lower-rank effects being removed. He couldn't help but wonder, however, if the changes were purely due to ranking-up or whether his perception of his own powers was impacting the description. His thoughts turned to Clive and how excited he would be to figure it out.

"What are you thinking about?" Asya asked.

"Hmm?"

He looked up, distracted.

"What are you thinking about?" she repeated. "You looked sad all of a sudden."

"I was thinking about a friend," Jason said. "We really could have used him in all this. He's probably the only guy I know as smart as my niece. She'd still eat him for breakfast, though."

Jason narrowed his eyes at Akari, then conjured his cloak around him.

"Punch me in the face," he told her.

"What?"

"I got a new ability I want to try," he said. "Punch me in the—"

Akari dashed forward, supernaturally quick to jab Jason in the middle of the face, sending him reeling and letting out a nasal moan.

"Ah, you hit me in the eye."

"I was aiming for your nose."

"You clipped the nose pretty good," he said, the blocked-nose tone of his voice backing him up as he crouched over, both hands clasped over his face. "Clearly, I'll have to get the hang of this ability. Thank you, by the way."

"You just thanked me for punching you in the face," Akari said.

"Well, I was asking for it," Jason said. "I think I might just focus on the fact that my cloak will let me fly, now. Can't wait until we land and I can try it out, but honestly, I think I'll get more practical use out of flying with Shade. It's weirdly anti-climactic."

He looked at Asya, who was looking back at him with amusement.

"What?" he asked.

"You're kind of honking when you talk," she said with a giggle.

"I got punched in the face!"

"Also, you asked someone to punch you in the face."

Next to Asya, Akari snorted a laugh.

“Girls are mean,” Jason complained.

“Jason,” Asya said. “Didn’t you tell me that you don’t use breath and vocal chords to speak anymore?”

“That’s right,” Jason said, still holding his nose.”

“So, why would your voice go funny unless you were deliberately putting it on?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

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Asya moved up through the plane and took the phone handset from the flight attendant. Her eyes went wide as she listened to the person on the other end.

“Give me the details,” she said.

A while later, she moved back to the other passengers as the plane changed course. Akari and Jason were sat on the floor, meditating, while Aram was badly losing a game of chess to Dawn.

“You’ve really never played this before?” Aram asked.

Jason and Akari opened their eyes, focusing on Asya. Despite the aura-suppression bracelet that helped her mask her emotions from high-rank essence users, Jason and Akari both felt her inner turmoil.

“Why are we changing course?” Aram asked.

“We’re shifting west, to Indonesia,” Asya said, looking rather lost as she took a seat. “There’s been an incident and we need to intervene.”

“Why us?” Akari asked.

“Because they’re calling in everyone on this side of planet,” Asya said.

“That bad?” Aram asked.

“In Indonesia,” Asya explained, “there’s been something of a balance of forces between the Network and the Cabal. The Network has been protecting the urbanised areas and offering substantial support for the Cabal facing monster waves in remote areas.”

“There’s tension?” Jason asked.

“In most places around the world, either the Cabal or the Network is the dominant force,” Asya explained. “The monster waves have seen unprecedented collaboration, with whichever force is stronger taking the lead, although that is usually the Network. The secondary force acts in support and that’s been working.”

“But you said balance of forces,” Jason said. “The Cabal and the Network have been struggling for control in Indonesia?”

“Yes,” Asya said. “Those tensions have been put aside during the monster waves, but they haven’t been put away. Thus far, it’s been fine, or that’s what we thought. It turns out that the government there has been ramping up their support for the Network. They’re trying to establish their authority in the magical community by picking a side, but neither they nor the Network branches affiliated with them realised how much hidden power the Cabal possessed. Some of the Indonesian branches got forceful, only to bite off more than they could chew. A lot of the smaller branches weren’t happy, even throwing in with the Cabal.”

“A Network civil war,” Aram said, his expression troubled. “There’s been actual fighting?”

“It’s worse than that,” Asya said. “The larger Network branches there knew the International Committee wouldn’t stand for what they were doing with the monster waves going on, so they kept the whole thing under wraps. It’s not like anyone was going around to check on them with things the way they are, so long as they kept reporting that everything was fine. None of this has hit the media, so no one was the wiser and they’ve managed to keep the conflict secret.”

“Surely the smaller branches reported that the main branches were off the reservation,” Jason said.

“They did,” Asya admitted awkwardly. “It was passed off as the little fish complaining and the usual tension between the Network and the Cabal.”

“Are you kidding?” Aram asked. “What is the International Committee doing?”

“Fighting the monster apocalypse, Michael,” Asya said. “We’re all stretched a little thin right now and things are going to fall through the cracks.”

“It’s a civil war in our own organisation!” Aram exclaimed. “That’s a bloody big crack.”

“Blame can wait until we have time to judge with consideration,” Akari said. Despite her still being sat cross-legged on the floor, her calm voice carried an authoritative weight.

“Rather than look back with recrimination,” she continued, “we need to look forward, to the challenges ahead.”

“That’s my concern as well,” Jason said. “Asya, please tell me that what I’m thinking is wrong.”

“What are you thinking?” Aram asked, having calmed down a little.

“If there’s a problem with patrolling for proto-spaces,” Jason said, “branches are under instruction to report to the International Committee and request immediate assistance,” Jason said.

“Oh, damn,” Aram said, following Jason's train of thought. “If they have a problem with checking for spaces but don't report it to avoid scrutiny...”

“That's exactly what happened,” Asya confirmed. “It's the worst-case scenario. Makassar, in South Sulawesi. One and a half million people. A category-three dimensional space started dumping monsters into it less than an hour ago. Network responders are onsite already but the logistics of evacuating or protecting a population of that size and that density is a nightmarish quagmire. They were a million and a half before the city was declared a safe zone. Now we're looking at a sweep-and-clear operation through a city full of civilians and monster wave refugees.”

Only Dawn kept her composure at the thought of monsters spilling into a heavily populated city. The others were pale and shell-shocked.

“It still gets worse,” Asya said.

“How?” Aram asked.

“There's another dimensional space, practically on top of the first one. Between them, they'll box the city in. The second space is projected to cross the breakdown threshold within the next hour and start spilling out monsters within two.”

“Twin dimensional spaces,” Aram said. “That's rare.”

“It used to be,” Jason said. “I've encountered it a half-dozen times when sweeping for proto-spaces over the last couple of months. There should still be a chance to shut it down if they've detected it, right?”

“Early responders detected it, but there's no way they can shut it down in time,” Asya said, then paused as if afraid to continue. Finally, she spoke.

“It's a category-four space,” she said.

Silence followed Asya's revelation. One or more gold-rank monsters, surrounded by silvers, was not something that could be quickly readied for, certainly not within an hour.

“I can extend the duration of proto-space stability,” Jason said. “Can we get me there in time?”

“We don't think so but we're trying,” Asya said. “We're on route to Darwin right now. We're going to throw you out of the plane instead of taking the time to land and a portal specialist will meet you on the ground. He's been to Makassar and will send you directly. Forces are being readied to take on a category-four anchor monster, whether we catch it in the dimensional space or not. The Guangzhou branch is already preparing magically-enhanced heavy munitions.”

“It or them,” Aram said. “Multiple anchor monsters are more the norm than the exception, these days.”

Jason turned to Dawn.

“If you have any more tricks or secrets, now is the time.”

Dawn frowned, her expression conflicted.

“You know I can't intervene,” she said, “as much I might want to. The most I could tell you is that The United States of America and China branches of the Network have undeclared assets. Those assets are difficult and costly to field but could be critical. Perhaps you can pressure China into deploying them, but most likely they will deny their existence. They will keep them in case what is happening to Indonesia happens to them.”

“What kind of assets?” Aram asked.

“I've already said more than I should,” Dawn said. “I will not speak on it further.”

“People are dying,” Aram said. “This is no time for secrets and games.”

“If she says she won't say more, trying to change her mind will only waste time we don't have,” Jason told him.

“At this point, we'll take what we can get,” Asya said, standing up. “I'll go see what I can do.”

She headed for the front of the plane where the phone was located. Jason looked at Akari, both of them still sitting on the floor.

“Get your mind settled and whatever rest you can,” he told her. “I don't think either of us are ready for what we're about to see.”

It had barely been days since Jason had been desperately fighting to save lives in Broken Hill. In its wake, he had been seeking out warmth and levity while his insides were pulled taut like a bowstring. As he pictured the lives being lost at that very moment, the bowstring snapped.

## Chapter 366

### An Intelligent King

One proto-space had already disgorged its monstrous contents onto the city of Makassar. A second one, with even stronger magic, was on the verge of doing the same. This proto-space was a troubling reflection of the city it was about to open up on, except that the buildings were grown over with rainforest and the sky was cast over with volcanic ash. The city was not as hot as its normal-world counterpart but was weighed-down with oppressive humidity.

In the heart of the city, four figures stood atop a building. They were roughly the shape of a human but twice the height and covered in brown and green scales. Their faces were the most inhuman part, long and dominated by large, toothy mouths. Above the mouths were eyes filled with intelligence and cunning.

They all wore clothes and chitin-like armour, conjured by just one of their magical abilities. They could also conjure up various weapons, from swords to magical firearms, although none had chosen to do so at that moment. They were looking down at the aperture that the humans had opened, surrounded by the corpses of those same humans. Only a handful had managed to escape back through the shimmering circle.

The only living things in front of the portal were monsters. They had the look of dinosaurs, although not species a palaeontologist would recognise. The toothy jaws of the long-necked quadrupeds made plain that they were not herbivorous. They also moved faster than dinosaurs were thought to, with silver-rank flesh being stronger yet more supple than that of the prehistoric creatures they resembled. It left them looking like giant, single-headed hydras.

Although they were the largest and most numerous of the dino-monsters, they were only one type of many, each a monstrous variant of something someone from earth might recognise. Featherless, bronze-rank raptors, a third the height of a human, that hunted in packs. Horn-headed triceratops variants whose beaked mouths were lined with pointed teeth. Tyrannosaurs whose tiny arms ended not in hands but puckered sphincters that shot poison darts to slow their prey.

Every type appeared to be a meat-eater, built to prey on the mammalian monsters that also populated the proto-space and were themselves not weak. Lanky, giant apes using agility, cunning and powerful fists to escape or even overcome their would-be predators were just one species struggling to survive in the unusually Darwinian monster ecology.

Monsters of any kind rarely preyed on one another, but the three varieties in the crowded proto-space seemed to operate in a hierarchy. At the bottom were the mammalians, which were either bronze or silver-rank. Preying on them were the dino-monsters, ranging from the bronze-rankers at the bottom of the heap to the peak predators, like the tyrannosaurs. Those even went after some of their fellow dino-monsters, as well as the mammalian varieties.

At the top, above even the largest and most savage dinosaur monsters, were the humanoid dino-men. They were not as strong or as tough as the larger dino-monsters, and far fewer in number. What they had did have was intelligence and unusual magical abilities. This ranged from the power to conjure weapons and armour to their most powerful ability: controlling the unintelligent dino-monsters.

One of the dino-men was not like the others. Standing above the intelligent silver-ranked dino-men was the only one of their number to be gold-rank. Quickly dominating the others, he had chosen the smartest and strongest to serve him personally, while the rest were sent to gather the unintelligent monsters together.

Under the gold-ranker's direction, they had pushed back the human incursion and held the aperture secure. They awaited the point where the proto-space delivered them to another world, more vast than the one they knew.

"Will more of the humans come?" One of the silvers asked. He had chosen the name Silha for himself. The other silver-rank male had named himself Kowal, and the female, Chesh. The gold-ranker they referred to as King.

King had been the anchor monster for the proto-space, the one the humans needed to kill to prevent the monsters from entering the human world. Although the proto-space was about to break down and no longer had an anchor monster, King could still feel the proto-space through the lingering connection.

"I don't know if more will come," King said. "We have passed the point of no return. Even if the humans managed to kill me now, it would change nothing. I suspect they know this and prepare for our arrival, instead of further, futile expeditions."

"What will we find on the other side?" Chesh asked.

"I, like you all, am less than two days old," King said. "I know no more than any of you. Not how I came to know what a day is, the language we are speaking or even the concept of a language. What I do know is that the humans will not tolerate our existence. If we are going to make a place for ourselves, we must carve it from their flesh and wash it clean with their blood."

"They will be many, won't they?" Silha asked.



“Yes,” King said, looking down at the aperture. “And they will be gathered around the other side of the hole they made in the wall of this world. If we are close to that hole when we cross over, we will be overwhelmed. We must move, so that when we do pass from this world to the next, we do not arrive in their midst.”

“If we leave, more may enter through the hole,” Kowal said.

“It is too late for them to accomplish anything,” King said, looking down at the dino-monsters teeming around the aperture. In range of the dino-men, they were under control and placid, despite their highly aggressive nature.

“Our unintelligent brethren will suffice to occupy any humans that enter, at least in the time it takes for this world to end and pass us into the one that follows.”

Taking King's lead, the four quickly departed the vicinity of the aperture.

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On the Network plane, Akari watched Jason, who hadn't spoken since the discussion on the Makassar disaster. Still sitting on the floor, he wasn't meditating. He was just staring into space, stern-faced. She was struck by how different he looked without the usual lively eyes and perpetual half-smirk. Instead of looking at the world like there was a joke only he could see, there was a determination in his silver eyes that slightly unnerved her. Even without his aura behind it, as she couldn't sense it at all, when his eyes flicked in her direction it made her feel like a prey animal.

“We're here,” he said, standing up. The action looked oddly inhuman as he rose straight up from his cross-legged position without using his hands for balance or support. The smooth, confident motion of it made Akari think of a camouflaged praying mantis, revealing its presence with sudden movement.

The Network plane boasted a feature uncommon in most private jets: a quick-deploy hatch in the floor. It was in its own small compartment so as to not disrupt the rest of the plane when the hatch opened. Jason strode towards it even as the pilot announced that they were approaching the drop zone.

Asya joined the pair in the drop compartment, standing by the button for the hatch as Jason and Akari stood on top of it. Jason was shrouded in mist for a few seconds, his combat robes in place when it dispersed.

“Stay safe,” Asya told them, her eyes on Jason.

“The objective is to keep other people safe,” he said as he grabbed Akari's hand. “Hit the button.”

Asya gave him a worried look, lifted the clear cap and slammed her palm onto the big red button. The floor hatch slammed open and Jason and Akari were dumped into the

skies over Darwin. Jason let his shadow arm extended to keep his grip on Akari's hand when dropping from the plane yanked them apart. He would need to pull her close when he decelerated their drop. In the meantime, they both angled their bodies into a streamlined free fall.

As they drew closer to the ground, Akari sensed the silver-ranker below them and they aimed for that spot, an empty beach. As they dropped further and further without Jason pulling out his cloak, Akari became increasingly concerned. The ground seemed to be lunging up at them.

“JASON!”

He didn't turn his head, although she knew his sharp senses heard her despite her voice immediately being carried off in the wind rush of their fall. His eyes were locked on the ground below as she called his name again and again, not eliciting so much as a sideways glance.

She was about to flatten her body to slow the descent when he seemed to sense it. Instead of conjuring his cloak, however, he shocked her with a burst of overwhelming aura suppression that jolted her into holding her descent angle, along with a tug on her arm from Jason.

Finally Jason yanked himself to her with his shadow arm and his starlight cloak came into being, unfurling like wings of night. Gravity's hold was drastically lessened and they rapidly decelerated, barely a hundred metres from the ground. They were travelling at ninety metres per second before Jason opened his cloak and even magic could decelerate them only so much. It took only seconds before they crashed into the soft sand, their superhuman bodies soaking the impact.

They landed on a beach that would normally be full of tourists, but the crisis had even the locals staying in their homes. Akari stood, stunned for a moment, before wheeling on Jason.

“What are you thinking?” Akari demanded.

“Seconds matter,” Jason said, providing no further explanation as he strode toward the man jogging over the sand in their direction, waving a friendly hand.

“Hi, I'm Remy. You two came in pretty hot.”

“Portal,” Jason demanded.

“Jeez, so much for small talk,” Remy said and started drawing a circle in the air with his arm. “You're lucky I can even hit this distance. My ability only got stronger a little while ago. Normally the Network stops giving out cores once you hit silver, but those of us with portals are the chosen few. Especially now.”

A shimmering sheet of rainbow light appeared in front of him and Jason marched through without hesitation.

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Jason stepped out of the portal, which led to the inside of a ramshackle slum house in Makassar. It was largely empty, aside from a rotting mattress and the stench of urine.

“We’re in a slum near Paotere Harbour,” Remy said after coming through the portal behind Jason. “There’s a command post there; you should be able to sense the essence users from here.”

Jason was already moving, kicking the rotten door right off its hinges and dashing out. His cloak spread out like wings, whipping him into the air and then launching him over the rooftops. He did not pause to revel in the sensation of personal flight, his attention being elsewhere.

- 
- You have entered an area coterminous to a proto-space.
  - The proto-space is in the final stages of breaking down and can no longer be prevented from purging into your current space.
  - If you enter the proto-space, the breakdown will be decelerated and the manifested entities within will be purged into your current space at a reduced rate.
- 

“A thank you would be nice,” Remy called after him, having emerged from the portal after Jason. He turned to Akari, who had followed close behind. “Your friend is kind of a dick.”

Akari followed Jason outside and leapt up, hopping rapidly over the corrugated rooftops of the slum. She chased after him, likewise detecting the cluster of essence users. She also detected essence-users clashing with monsters all around. It seemed that the slum had already been evacuated, having neither normal-rank auras or signs of having been ravaged by monsters.

Jason quickly reached Paotere Harbour, clustered with wooden pinisi ships crammed against one another. He could see that the boats were being used to evacuate civilians while the open space of the docks had been occupied by a Network command post. Jason’s distinctive appearance was well known and Akari arrived to join him as he was being shown to the camp’s command tent.

“Is it true that you can stall out a dimensional space?” the commander asked after the briefest introductions.

“It’s too late to stop the monsters coming out,” Jason said. “I think I can slow down the rate at which they emerge, though. I’m not sure by how much.”

“Whatever you can do, we’ll take, but we haven’t been able to secure the aperture. The other side is packed tight with category three-dimensional entities.”

“Not an issue,” Jason said. “I’ll buy you as much time as I can.”

“I don’t suppose you have any of those magic buses on hand for moving evacuees?”

Jason closed his eyes, exploring his sense of the proto-space that none of the other essence users could even detect without rituals. In most cases, a proper astral space would cut Jason off from his familiars, while a proto-space would not. Jason had become familiar enough with them to tell if it would be any different which, in this case, it was not. He would miss Shade in the proto-space but others needed what his familiar could offer more.

“Alright,” Jason said, marching outside. “Clear me some room.”

The commander ordered space clear as Shades started emerging from Jason, only one remaining as Jason’s shadow.

“I’m going to need some mana,” Jason said, turning his head to where people were being evacuated by boat. He took to the air, his cloak winging him out over the water where he landed on the mast of a pinisi boat, perched like a dark bird. He had picked out the boat with the most wretched-looking passengers.

*“Feed me your sins.”*

He drained all the sickness from the slum residents, turning it all into mana. His Sin Eater power meant that he could absorb it all, exceeding his normal mana limit, although it would leak away over time. He intended to use it well before that happened.

Returning to the shore, he conjured cloaks over the thirty Shades standing by, barely having enough mana for all of them, even after collecting extra. Immediately afterwards, the Shades started merging to form five buses with shadowy, starlit exteriors.

“All yours, commander,” Jason said. Shade had experience coordinating with Network forces from Broken Hill and knew what to do.

“We can get you to the aperture,” the commander said. “Fair warning, though, establishing an arrival zone wasn’t going well, last I heard.”

“I’ll make my own way,” Jason said.

Jason’s figure blurred as the air around him seemed to slowly bend. They felt him project his aura which seemed to merge with the world around it, blending until it was once again undetectable. Then the warped space snapped back into place and he was gone. The commander and the other Network staff were left staring at the empty space Jason had just vacated.

“He can just go into dimensional spaces on his own?”

“Yes,” Akari, said, distracted by the essence users she could still sense fighting to keep the waterfront evacuation zone free of monsters. “Where can you use me?”

“What's your specialisation?” the commander asked her.

“Killing things.”

## Chapter 367

### Hunted

The proto-space version of Makassar was overrun with rainforest growth, the sky filled with volcanic ash. Four humanoid dinosaur hybrids were moving through the city, the gold-rank King in the lead. There were more of the silver-rank dino-men scattered through the proto-space as well.

King and his subordinate monsters were moving away from the aperture and the horde of humans they anticipated being on the other side. They did not want to be dumped amongst them when the proto-space shifted them into the larger reality. The powerful legs of the monsters sent them thundering through the city at pace until King suddenly stopped.

“What is it?” asked Chesh. The only female of the group, she was the leader of King’s silver-rank cohort, having proven her strength against Kowal and Silha.

“Something has changed,” King said, tilting his head as if listening for something. The former anchor monster could still sense the condition of the proto-space. “There’s something here that’s slowing down the passage to the next world. The time between each of our brethren crossing over will be longer, making them vulnerable to those awaiting us on the other side.”

“What is doing this?” Kowal asked.

“I don’t know,” King said. “I think some manner of unusual being has intruded upon this world. Spread out, find the others. Tell them to find this being and destroy it.”

“Is there anything else we can do?” Chesh asked.

“As this realm breaks down, breaches will form. Tell the others that if they find a stable breach, send our brethren through. Make sure they know only to go if it is stable. If it is changing in shape or size they must avoid it at all costs, for it will kill them.”

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As he appeared in the proto-space, Jason realised that it was a warped version of the equivalent space in normal reality. This was something he had encountered before and while it was uncommon, it was not so uncommon as to put him off. This version of Paotere Harbour was post-apocalyptic, with the wooden boats smashed, rotted and half-submerged. The buildings he could see were in disrepair and overgrown, reminding him of the astral space in which he had spent half a year. These buildings were not ancient stone ruins, however, but the modern constructions of his own world.

The ambient magic was thick and rich, more than any place he had been before. The magical strength to sustain gold-rank entities would actually be useful to him, making his

relatively low power level harder to sense. Like a quiet noise hidden by a louder one, the potent ambient magic would mask his presence.

The ambient magic that supported the gold-rank monster that was somewhere in the proto-space was not present on Earth. Once it crossed over, the monster would rapidly become starved for magic. The damage it could do until it did, especially in a densely populated area, meant that waiting it out would not be an acceptable approach for the Network forces. They would need to find a way to kill it without wiping out half the city themselves.

Jason had two goals in the astral space. One he completed just by arriving.

- 
- You have entered a proto-space in the process of dissolution.
  - As the physical space breaks down, dimensional apertures will appear, including stable apertures that allow monsters to escape to the coterminous reality. Other apertures will be unstable, containing profoundly destructive dimensional forces.
  - [Nirvanic Transfiguration] will slow the process of dissolution but cannot arrest it. Apertures from the proto-space will appear at a reduced rate.
  - [Nirvanic Transfiguration] will allow you to actively stabilise or destabilise nearby apertures.
- 

So long as Jason remained in the proto-space, the monsters from it would arrive in more of a drip-feed than a wave as their escape points appeared more slowly. Given the preponderance of silver-rank monsters, every moment he could stall their emergence would give the Network more breathing room to protect the civilians.

That would buy time for his second objective: to kill as many silver-rank monsters as he could before they reached the real Makassar. He had no illusions that he could match the Network's ability to sweep and clear but he would do his best. As for the gold-ranker, he would need to avoid it.

Even if he had been silver-rank instead of at the peak of bronze, there was no way for him to overcome a gold-rank monster. The jump from bronze to silver was something he had learned to overcome but silver to gold was on a whole different scale. If he was silver rank and the designated damage dealer in a whole team of silvers it might be different. With others protecting and facilitating him it might be possible, although at the early stages of silver that would be a sketchy proposition at best.

Jason knew full well that if the gold-ranker found him, he was dead. He had one chance to resurrect before silver-rank, though, and if this was how he spent it, he could accept that.

All of these thoughts passed through Jason's head in a moment. He could sense the monsters heading in his direction, probably attracted by the magical distortion of his

arrival. He had emerged on the open ground of the docks and standing in the open was a quick path to being swarmed and killed, so he looked around for the shadow of the closest building and then stepped into Shade and vanished.

\*\*\*

A dino-man who had chosen the name Loth for himself watched rainbow smoke rise up over a nearby rooftop. He had seen its like before, with monsters dissolving into the smoke sometime after death. What was new was the sheer amount, as if many monsters had died all at once.

He had been told of a being that was slowing their passage to the next world, so he was leading a group of the unthinking dino-monsters in search of a stable portal. All that rainbow smoke was likely to be related to the unknown being, however, and the priority was to hunt it down. If he destroyed it, he might get the chance to join King's cohort.

He had almost thirty dino-monsters under his control, although they were spread over a goodly area as they picked their way between the city buildings. The streets were broken and overgrown, some worse than others. It ranged from almost intact with maybe some grass growing through a crack to full-blown trees rising through holes in shattered concrete.

Loth's control over the monsters kept their aggression in check, although if pushed too close together, their base instincts would take over. That meant he had to spread them out, which the terrain made even worse. The outermost monsters of his group were at the very limits of his control range, where his dominion over them was weakest.

The bulk of Loth's forces were long-necked sauropods, the most common of the silver-rank monsters. He also had two triceratops-like, horn-faced chargers and one of the tyrannosaurus variants with the spike-projector forelimbs.

Loth marched confidently amongst his monster force. Although he mentally urged them to pick up speed, there was only so fast the hefty quadrupeds could go. The silver-rank monsters were fast for creatures of their size, though, imitating a small earthquake as they moved through the streets.

Suddenly Loth regretted collecting only the strongest of the dino-monsters, now that he needed information. The lower-rank creatures were smaller, quicker and would have made passable scouts.

His herd of monsters was powerful but a sleeping person would feel its approach. His concern was that the unknown being would flee, although if it was responsible for the rainbow smoke he saw, perhaps not.



He could communicate with the dino-monsters but they were not intelligent. The larger ones were little more than sacks of angry meat being driven by instinct and hunger. The pack hunters were cunning and at least smart enough to be acceptable for scouting.

Loth and his monsters were closing in on the area he had seen the rainbow smoke when he heard one of his dino-monsters yell in pain and rage. Loth sent an admonishing jolt of mental force, thinking one of the monsters at the edge of his range had loosened from his control and become aggressive.

Wary of a chain reaction of his monsters started fighting, Loth made his way quickly in the direction of his unruly monster. What he found was a sauropod thrashing its necks around angrily, seeking out an enemy it apparently couldn't find. Loth spotted the source of its rage: a black rot spreading from one of its rear legs to the rest of its body.

After realising it was not obstreperous monsters but an attack, he conjured a magical firearm. It was long, stylised with a dinosaur motif and shot heavy, poisoned spikes. He went on the lookout for whatever was responsible, assuming it to be the unknown being. Some distance away, he heard another cry of rage and pain.

Loth found himself running back and forth as more of his monsters were afflicted, one after another without catching so much as a glimpse of the one responsible. Packed close together, the instincts of the monsters took over as Loth's control slipped further and further away.

The rage and pain of the afflicted creatures caused them to lash out and the others fought back, rapidly turning the monster-filled streets into a meat grinder. The critical point came when the tyrannosaur was afflicted and went berserk, annihilating what remained of Loth's hold on the monsters. Loth climbed the tallest nearby building to get up and out of the chaos.

As he looked down at the mess, he failed to see any trace of what was attacking his monsters, forcing him to escape them. Then a jolt passed through him as he realised that he wasn't being attacked at all. He was being hunted.

The madness below accomplished the twin goals of depriving Loth of his minions and isolating him from support. His instincts told him to turn around and he saw a dark figure walking across the rooftop, silver eyes shining under an otherwise impenetrable hood. Loth raised his gun and fired, the spike passing through the figure as if it were an illusion. Then he realised it was not a dark figure but a figure made of darkness, with no more substance than air.

As he made the discovery, Loth felt a blade slice between the armour plates covering his back. It was a shallow cut, barely breaking through his scales to strike flesh. He whirled but found no one. He turned back to the dark figure but it too was gone.

Loth cast his gaze around, looking for any sign of his attacker. Normally his senses were sharp but he could detect nothing. Pain bit his ankle and he looked down to see a long, narrow line of darkness that ended in a hand gripping a dagger slick with Loth's own blood. He was barely able to spot it before it snaked off the edge of the roof.

Rushing to the side of the rooftop, he wasn't foolish enough to stick his head over. He extended his gun instead, firing spikes from the muzzle into any lurking ambusher. Unfortunately for Loth, the spikes did little to the lurking ambusher in question.

The spikes easily pierced the bloody rags shrouding the figure perched on the lower ledge but did little to the leeches inside. Strips of wet, red cloth shot up, wrapping around the gun and Loth's arms and he scrambled back over the roof. The gun was pulled from his hands as his retreat dragged the bloody rag entity over the edge of the roof. It was half the size of Loth, whose silver-rank strength was easily up to the task.

Loth desperately yanked off the strips of cloth wrapping themselves around him but more and more kept shooting out from the entity. As fast as he worked, they grabbed his arms, legs and torso faster than could get rid of them. They were not much of an impediment to his movement, because of his strength, but they were dragging the entity closer and closer to Loth, even as he continued to back across the roof. He didn't know what would happen if the entity reached him but every instinct screamed at him not to let it.

Giving up on pulling the strips off by hand, Loth conjured a sword and raised it into the air, ready to swing down and sever the strips. Before he could, a set of vibrant energy beams struck the blade, spoiling his grip.

Turning to the new enemy, Loth saw that it was a floating cloak occupied not by a person but by an unnerving glowing eye. Four more eyes floated around it, which were the sources of the beams still firing in his direction. In his moment of distraction, the rag-entity reached him and leeches started squeezing out between the cloth strips like the flesh of a soft fruit being squished in a fist. They swarmed over him and he collapsed, screaming. He never heard the spells being chanted at him.

\*\*\*

Jason stood at the edge of the building, watching the monsters tear one another apart. Jumping off the roof, he dived in to accelerate the process. Since arriving in the proto-space with only one of Shade's bodies, the way he fought reminded him of his earliest days as an adventurer. His skills were greater, his abilities more advanced and his

attributes well into the superhuman range, but there was an old-school feel of desperately walking on a knife-edge.

Only against the largest groups, organised by one of the intelligent monsters did he hunt. Otherwise, he threw himself into the fray to get the most done in the least time. He paid the price, frequently pushing it too hard and getting slapped down. His armour was hanging off him in ribbons, despite its self-repairing properties, and he was painted red in his own blood. Jason had been damaged enough to kill him a dozen times over but his defensive measures and self-healing kept him going.

When the last of the large monster clutch was dead, Jason held out his hands to either side of him.

*“As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest.”*

The remnant life force of the monsters rose up and flooded into Jason, taking his health far beyond its ordinary limit and into the realm of role-playing game hit points. This had already proven key to surviving long enough to drain health when fighting against the gangs of silver-rank dino-monsters.

Without an army of Shades to play decoy and escape hatch, Jason found himself with less margin for error at the same time he was pushing the boundaries of what he could take on at once. As a result, he was relying on drain and recovery powers to get him through situations where he would normally rely on stealth and evasion.

Jason left the dead monsters behind, already on his way to the next fight. Shade lingered, flickering over the battlefield to touch each of the dead monsters.

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➤ [Would you like to loot \[Tri-Horn Charger\]?](#)

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As of his rank-up, Shade could use Jason’s non-combat abilities, including the power to initiate looting. So often, when dealing with proto-spaces, Jason was faced with too many monsters and too little time. As he left fallen monsters behind to confront the next ones he left potential loot to literally go up in smoke. Now that Shade could trigger the looting for him, that was no longer the case.

Since Shade had ranked up, Jason had accumulated more than his inventory could store, most of which he shovelled onto the Network. Given the circumstances, the Network was hungrily devouring every resource it could get its hands on, making Jason a more critical asset than ever. He also stowed an amount in the storerooms of Asano village, which had its own magical maintenance costs.

Jason did keep certain choice items and materials for himself, though. Colin's silver-rank vessel had two fairly straightforward requirements, which Jason had already collected. One was a wheelbarrow-load of silver-rank blood quintessence and the other, disturbingly, was a portion of Jason's own skin. The materials for Gordon's next vessel were less gruesome but more elusive, evading Jason despite all the looting.

Jason's looting ability always had a merciful ability to be used at range, helping him avoid mouthfuls of rainbow smoke. That range was limited but could be extended through Shade's presence, like Jason's other non-combat powers. After Shade queued up all the looting dialogue boxes, Jason accepted them all at once and items started appearing in his inventory as his currency counters ticked up.

Jason was well away by the time he triggered the looting. As rainbow smoke drifted up around him, Shade was about to leave when he spotted a green blur shooting at him. He dashed for the nearest shadow but was too slow, the blur grabbing his head in a clawed and scaled hand. Shade struggled to escape using his incorporeal nature but the claw was reinforced with magic that held him inescapably in place.

## Chapter 368

### Gamble

King stood on a rooftop, clutching Shade's head in his hand.

"You can hear me through this vessel, can't you?" King asked.

"Yes," Jason's voice came from Shade.

"I am going to find you and kill you."

"Probably, yes," Jason said.

"You do not fear death?"

"Strike me down and I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine."

"You are a fool," King snarled.

"Yes," Jason admitted. "I'm sorry for the circumstances in which you came into being. You were doomed to a short and tragic life from the very start."

"You don't know what my life will be."

"Yes, I do. This world has the magic to keep you alive but the one you will soon find yourself in does not. You will rapidly grow weaker until it becomes bad enough that the humans can kill you. Hope that they do it quickly because they will study you if they can, in ways that strip away dignity and leave only pain. I'll do my best to stop them if I am still alive but I can make no promises. I fight for the humans but I cannot speak for them."

"You speak like you are not one of them."

"I was. Now I'm something else. Not to say that I'm better than they are, because I'm not. I just convince myself I am, sometimes. If it were up to me, I'd give your people a patch of land and leave them be. Let them see to one another when the time came. Do you understand how your kind end?"

"I do," King snarled.

"I'm sorry for that," Jason said. "I respect the desire to escape what others tell you is inevitable. My choice would be to give you a place for you to find your own way but the humans would never tolerate that."

"I have known this from the beginning," King said. "Only by purging the humans from it can we claim a place for ourselves."

"There is no place for you except here, and soon even that will be gone. Only you have the strength to withstand the humans on the other side and that strength will leak from you like blood from a wound. The only questions are how ugly your demise becomes and how many humans you take with you."

"As many as I can."

"I thought as much," Jason said. "I imagine I'd feel much the same in your situation. I can't even offer an alternative. When you appear on the other side, they will try to kill you, use you or both. I'll do my best to stop you but we both know I can't."

"Then until this world ends, we will try to kill one another."

"Fighting you is a gamble I don't want to make," Jason said. "Come for me if you want but I'm coming for everyone else. Do you have a name?"

"They call me King. You?"

"Jason Asano."

"Whatever my fate, Jason Asano, you will die before you see it."

"That seems a likely order of events. I can't stop you, King. But you can't stop me, either."

"I'll kill you."

"That won't be enough."

Still dangling from King's hand, Shade's body self-destructed, dissolving into nothing.

\*\*\*

Jason still had a lot of mana from draining the monster corpses with Blood Harvest, so reconstituting one of Shade's bodies was not too draining. He had Shade self destruct the one body in the proto-space with him since if the monster could catch Shade there was every chance he could track him back to Jason.

Not wasting time in getting back on the move, Jason started putting distance between himself and the gold-ranker. The broken and overgrown city offered shadows aplenty and even across stretches of open ground, Jason was far from sluggish.

"If he knows that you are avoiding him and hunting the others, he may collect the other intelligent monsters together," Shade said. "From what we've seen, they seem to be small in number."

"If they all cross over together, I can live with that," Jason said. "Asya said that the Network is mobilising the magically-enhanced heavy weapons and you've seen the details of that program, the same as me."

"The weapons are far from discriminatory," Shade said. "If they are targeting the gold-ranker, any silver-rankers will likely be caught up in the destruction."

"Exactly. If they're all in one spot, that's fewer missiles the Network has to throw around."

"King may be wary of an attack of this nature," Shade said. "This may be why the intelligent monsters are not gathered together."

“Or it could just be that they’re trying to get as many monsters under their control as they can. I’m doing what I can here but this whole space will last another few hours at best. I’ll barely make a dent in the numbers in that time, so most of these monsters are going to cross over. If they’re all gathered up for the Network to drop magic napalm or whatever on, all the better.”

They had already seen signs of dimensional collapse in the form of blank, white void spaces that were the natural apertures forming as the proto-space collapsed. The voids were plain and empty to the eye but Jason’s magical senses warned him of dimensional forces within, of such wildly destructive might only transcendent damage could surpass it. Jason and Shade had watched an entire building collapse when a large white void appeared over key structural points, instantly annihilating them.

Only a fraction of the apertures were safe to pass through. Jason experimented with exerting influence over the voids, having only used his ability to affect proto-spaces passively in the past. He could only actively affect a void when he was relatively close, within a few dozen metres. It was a useful range, but far less so than the passive effect that impacted the entire proto-space.

After a little practise, Jason could render the aperture safe or turn a safe one dangerous in only a moment. Most of the voids he encountered were dangerous and the ones that weren’t, he made dangerous. He was not going to leave gateways out of the proto-space open behind him if he could avoid it.

Such apertures were the normal means by which monsters escaped a dissolving space. Jason was familiar with the process from his time shutting down proto-spaces for the Network, at which he was now an old hand. He knew that more and more apertures would appear, more and more of which would be stable. By the time the space was in the final stages of breakdown, safe apertures would be everywhere. Until that happened, Jason would buy what time he could.

After the talk with King, Jason skipped over the next two clusters of monsters he encountered. Moving past them undetected, he put them between himself and the gold-ranker hunting him. He and Shade then encountered another large group led by one of the intelligent dino-men. This one had discovered a stable and very large aperture capable of taking in two of the giant monsters at a time. He was pushing his monsters through in a rush, like a drover sending cattle across a ford.

Jason moved forward as swiftly as he could undetected, suppressing his ability to affect the void. It meant a few more monsters crossing over but if he got his timing right, that would be a cost worth paying.

\*\*\*

The dino-man was caught up in herding his monsters through the aperture, pushing them faster and faster. He had packed them tighter than he really should, straining himself to push their aggressive instincts away from fighting each other in close confines and towards rushing the aperture.

When the two monsters currently moving through the aperture were torn to ribbons by the dimensional forces suddenly churning within he was startled. About to urge his monsters to stop, he was instead sprayed with leeches from a figure moving out of the shadows and struck with beams from afar.

The animals he had pushed into rushing the aperture kept going as the dino-man's concentration was lost. They too were shredded by the aperture, even as the dino-man was shredded by Jason. Eventually, the monsters, as dim-witted as they were, grew wise and stopped charging forward but not until around a dozen had run in with results akin to a giant, dimensional wood chipper.

The dino-man controlling them had fallen quickly to the combined onslaught of Jason's more attack-oriented fighting style that rapidly loaded afflictions with a multitude of dagger strikes before following up with the powerful spell combination of his affliction, drain and finisher.

With Colin piling on, it went even faster. The ambush had been effective in cutting the dino-man off from using its abilities as it fell to panic under a pile of leeches and it lacked the physical fortitude of its larger, less intelligent brethren. At the peak of bronze, Jason had reached the stage where he could blitz physically weaker varieties of silver-rank monster.

With the one controlling them dead, the other monsters were freed to follow their instincts, which were aggressive at the best of times. With the danger of the aperture and the close proximity they had been pushed into, they immediately attacked one another.

Jason joined in the chaos to clean up the remaining monsters. He went largely unnoticed as he made minor attacks on the giant beasts while they violently crashed into one another. Even so, he was hammered more than once, more by accident in the crush than by deliberate strike. The shield power of his amulet, his stacked-up health and his drain and recovery powers kept him fighting.

Once it was over, he drained the remaining life force from the monsters with Blood Harvest and left Shade to loot as he moved on. He took a fresh direction, knowing that the gold-ranker would likely find the battle site. He didn't want to leave a discernible path for him to follow.



\*\*\*

Jason was feeling the mental strain as he continued his unrelenting battle through the proto-space. His nerves frayed, knowing the gold-ranker could find him at any moment and that every monster he failed to kill likely meant lives lost once it crossed over. He was painted red with his own blood while his robe looked as bloody and torn as Colin's rags.

In the hours since he had spoken with King, the proto-space degradation had accelerated, leaving it an obstacle course of white void spaces. It was past the point where Jason had time to destabilise every safe aperture he found. He knew the effectiveness of his stalling was almost at an end as monsters would already be pouring through myriad apertures across the proto-space.

Jason's presence continued to slow the dissolution, though, even this close to the end. Every minute there was no portal strong enough to allow a gold-ranker to cross was a small victory. It also brought Jason and King closer together as the proto space shrank, the void devouring the proto-space from the edges in. The sky was no longer overcast with ash but a blank white as the sky literally came down on their heads.

\*\*\*

King stepped back from the aperture, his simple proximity causing it to lose stability.

"It was the strongest portal we could find," Chesh said. King's other two cohorts had already crossed over.

"I don't think any will be strong enough to let me leave until this world's final moments," King said.

"We never found the unknown being slowing it down."

"Jason Asano no longer matters," King said. "This world's end and our passage from it are inevitable. I can still sense the effect he has on this world, which will deliver him to me eventually unless he flees, which he will not."

"You seem certain."

"Like you, I came into this world with knowledge I do not understand the origins of. One of the things I know is arrogance. I felt it when I spoke with Jason Asano, enough to know that he will struggle to the bitter end."

"Do you think he truly can come back from death?"

"I was given just enough knowledge to understand how much more I do not know, so I cannot speak to what is or is not possible. If he truly can rise from the dead, I will kill him as many times as it takes."

\*\*\*

Jason and King both had been pushed together as the void closed in until they found themselves at either side of a rubble-strewn city block where patches of void had collapsed all the buildings. They stood, looking at one another, down a long street where rubble rested in grass grow through the cracked surface of the road. The world around them was silent as the void made no sound and King was the last remaining monster.

The others had flooded out of the apertures, with even the encroaching void becoming stable enough to serve as a giant aperture, closing in on them. It was almost stable enough for even King, which both Jason and King could sense.

“You cannot stop me,” King said. “The void itself is already becoming the final gateway.”

Jason and King walked towards one another as the void continued to close in on them. It was tight enough that Jason could exert his will to destabilise the entire void around them. He couldn't seal the passage but he could trigger the lethal roil of uncontrolled dimensional forces, turning the giant aperture into a mouth full of gnashing teeth.

- 
- The proto-space you are in has reached the final stage of dissolution. You are no longer able to directly transition out using [Nirvanic Transfiguration]. You will need to exit through an aperture.
  - The final aperture of the proto-space is extremely stable. It will consume increasing amounts of mana to enforce an unstable state.
- 

It didn't matter that he was locked into the space with King. Only by staying could he maintain the instability, which was the only weapon he had against the gold-rank monster. He only needed to hold on for moments as the void continued to encroach. King and Jason moved toward one another as the space went from the size of a block to a warehouse to a cottage.

“I am faster than you can imagine,” King said. “The moment you open a space for yourself to escape, I will go through before you've realised I moved.”

“That's why I'm not going to,” Jason said. “This space will close in on us and send us to the other side. After we pass through the dimensional forces, I doubt there will be enough of us left to spill onto the ground when we arrive.”

“You seem certain you will come back from death,” King said. “Are you just as certain that you won't be dragged off into the afterlife when you pass from this world to the other?”

"No," Jason said, "but stopping you is worth the gamble. If I die forever, there are others to take up my responsibilities. You may be the only hope for your people but I am not the only hope for mine."

The two continued to walk forward as the void closed in, arriving face to face.

"My brethren are slaughtering the humans as we speak," King said.

"I guarantee they are paying the price," Jason said, his voice not aggressive but sad. "So much death, and for what? It accomplishes nothing."

"If we truly are as doomed as you say, then we shall write our story across the soul of the human race in blood."

"Death is a poor legacy."

"We shall see how you tolerate your own."

Jason didn't even feel the blow that killed him, clawed fingers burying themselves in his head. His body dissolved into darkness, taking the form of a large bird filled with sparks of stellar light.

- 
- [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has protected you from death.
  - You have taken the form of a star phoenix. All equipment has been returned to your inventory.
  - Your current form is impervious to non-transcendent damage. You have a short time to move to safety before returning to your normal form.
  - This effect has been expended until you increase in rank.
- 

Jason's starlight phoenix form hovered in front of King. Jason's aura and the instability of the space around them was undiminished.

"I'll kill you as many times as it takes!" King announced, then opened his mouth to give a magically-empowered roar. Sonic forces that would have annihilated Jason's ordinary form passed harmlessly through his phoenix state.

The void closed into to the size of a large room, the dimensional forces starting to wash over them. King conjured a sword and started pouring the magic he had been reserving for the other side into it, causing it to glow with transcendent light. As he brought it down, Jason's aura turned the transcendent light blue, the same as Gordon's disruptive-force damage. Again, it would have killed Jason in an instant in his normal state but was harmless to the phoenix.

King howled as the void crashed in on them and the proto-space came to an end.

## Chapter 369

### Dying of Thirst in the Desert

Outside of the collapsing second proto-space, the sky grew dark over the real city of Makassar. A beautiful sunset contrasted the horror below, with large portions left looking like the bombed-out capital of a failed state. When the sun had risen it had been a thriving city, one of Indonesia's most secure safe zones – at least, publicly. The consequences of the Network and the Cabal waging war in the shadows had scarred the city with fire, destruction and death.

The Network and their military allies had acted quickly and international support was swiftly mobilised but the damage was largely done. The first proto-space emptied itself of monsters and the belated response was not enough to stave off disaster in a city of so many. Moves were rapidly made to secure the populace and contain the threat but the monsters were already loose.

Death and tragedy were everywhere, with too many civilians and not enough people to protect them. Mad panic clogged the streets before organised evacuations could be set up, leaving countless people out in the open. Only a tsunami of support from around Indonesia and its neighbouring countries prevented the city from becoming an abattoir.

The city was out of control but there was at least a sense of progress against the bronze-rank monsters of the first proto-space. The few silver-rank monsters had been a key priority, found and eliminated with overwhelming force.

Then silver-rank monsters started manifesting out of the second proto-space. The first proto-space had appeared at the south-east of the city, while the second covered the west and the north. The Network knew it was coming but had to direct the bulk of their forces toward the immediate threat. The second wave of monsters would be greater but people were dying to the first already. Even the minimal resources they dedicated to preparing for the second wave stretched them dangerously thin.

Despite the conflict between local Cabal and Network forces, they were forced to join hands against the danger. As international support started rolling in, the tension was somewhat alleviated as the reinforcements were a buffer between them.

Casualties amongst the Network teams started to tick up, as monsters started emerging from the second proto-space. Silver-rank monsters, in ever-increasing numbers, were not something that any Network force was equipped to handle. It became a race between international support arriving and the monsters of the second proto-space appearing, both escalating as one hour became two became three.

It was the first time a category four proto-space had reached the point of depositing its monsters, at least on dry land. The international response was likewise unprecedented as people and resources from around the globe descended on Makassar.

The head start the monsters had and the logistical problems of a densely-populated city made things hard for the Network forces. Lingering tension with their Cabal allies only added to already troubled communication as outposts were established around the city. Looming over all of it was the threat of the one or more gold-rank monsters the Network knew to be coming.

The decision was made to give up on trying to eradicate the monsters from the west and north until enough international support to sweep the silver-rank monsters without disastrous casualties. A defensive line was set up and the Network focused on evacuating as many civilians as possible either across it to the relatively secure parts of the city, or out of the city entirely.

The silver-rank monsters did not make the task easy and only so many people could be effectively evacuated. Despite rising casualties, the network kept going with desperation. On top of the silver-rank monsters roaming around, they had no idea when a gold-rank would appear. At that point, the section of the city it arrived in would be a full-blown war zone where any remaining civilians would be disregarded. Stopping any gold-rank monsters would be the priority, whatever the cost.

In the evacuation effort, the five Shade buses were present and active but far from the only magical vehicles. The fastest support to arrive from other parts of Indonesia and neighbouring countries were those with magical vehicles of their own. There were helicopters similar to Kaito's and buses like Shade. There were cars and vans, armoured personnel carriers, planes, tanks and boats.

Shade was not even the only intelligent vehicle, although most were conjured and very much in need of drivers and pilots. They ranged in style from ordinary-looking vehicles to highly exotic. Some were sleek and futuristic while others looked like post-apocalyptic battle wagons. There were even plainly fantastical variations, such as a plane in the form of an iron eagle, complete with articulating wings.

Eventually, the horrifying decision was made to withdraw all forces from the zone around the second proto-space. Dinosaur monsters were pouring through sheets of rainbow light, the one-way apertures leading from the proto-space. All Network forces pulled back behind the established defence lines, with only drones being sent in to catalogue the threats and horrors beyond. The civilians left behind would have to find a place to hide, escape on their own or die.

At a command post, Asya's role as an International Committee member was convincing branches outside of Indonesia to send whatever resources they could. China had completely denied having a secret weapon, as expected, although revealing that she knew managed to shake loose some of the powerful nation's more public resources.

China had already sent a host of silver-rankers south, with more being prepped for departure. They were also sending a veritable arsenal of resources, from spirit coins to weapons to the results of their magical heavy weapons program. Missiles and vehicle-mounted weaponry designed to handle category four threats had been loaded onto transport planes and were en route.

Australia sent other assets, including a freshly bronze-rank Kaito. He flew north with a helicopter-load of the strongest silver-rankers Australia had to offer, including Farrah. Over the last eight months, Kaito had been practically force-fed monster cores and his bronze-rank speed got resources on-site with haste. On arrival, he was immediately recruited into the evacuation units, while Farrah was moved to the defence front.

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Above the restricted zone, one of the drones monitoring the situation was a cutting edge, magically-enhanced, silver-rank surveillance model. It had even grounded some bronze-rank fliers by hitting their wings with its onboard weapon systems.

The early and timely arrival of several such drones was courtesy of the United States. What their operators were doing in the region with such advanced surveillance magitech had not been explained and, given the circumstances, no one asked.

The drone detected a category four magic surge, sending an alarm to its operator at a Network control post. The operator sent word and his small tent was soon crowded with people. The outpost commander, the tactical commander and the International Committee liaison all came in to watch the monitor, as did Farrah, who no one was stupid enough to try and stop.

"So this is it," outpost commander said in a voice full of trepidation. "A category four."

"Your friend Asano bought us valuable time," the tactical commander told Farrah. "In those extra hours, the heavy weapons from China arrived. I sent coordinates and they're being prepped for deployment."

"We need to know what we're dealing with," the outpost commander said. "One of the dinosaur monsters, but bigger? Are we going to have some kind of Godzilla turn up?"

"Could be, given the size of that aperture," the committee liaison said. On the screen in front of them, the rainbow light gold-rank aperture reached from the ground to the height of a four-storey building.

“I think one of the intelligent monsters is more likely,” the tactical commander said. “Probably their leader.”

The tactical commander had been focused on the intelligent monsters due to their organisation of the larger ones. Thus far, the smarter monster had been consolidating rather than making large moves, as if waiting or preparing for something. This had led to a theory discussed amongst the tactical commanders of the defence-line outposts that the gold-rank monster would be their leader.

Farrah remained silent. Rather than the gold-rank monster, there was someone else she wanted to see emerge from the proto-space. She already had people keeping tabs on the Shade buses, which were connected to Jason. They couldn't communicate with him in the proto-space but they could at least sense his general condition. Farrah had made sure that if anything drastic happened, word would be sent to her.

Finally, something emerged from the rainbow aperture. It was diminutive compared to most of the dinosaurs but at twice the height of a human, it was undoubtedly monstrous. It staggered from the light, slow and awkward. As it moved stumblingly forward, barely staying on its feet, it revealed a zombie-like appearance, with almost half of its flesh stripped away.

Its left arm was gone entirely and the flesh from the left side of its head was stripped to the bone. It was clad in the twisted remains of armour, most of which was missing, revealing wounds that even silver-rankers wouldn't live through. Its skeleton was on display in numerous places and its insides dangled out in front of it as it plodded one foot haltingly after the other.

“Undead? The outpost commander postulated.

“The drone is detecting life force,” the drone operator said. “That thing is somehow still alive. It's in a bad way, though.”

“I think we can all see that,” the committee liaison said.

“It's more than just what we can see,” the operator said. “Whatever happened to that monster left it with a severe magical deficit. It's trying to absorb ambient magic to fuel its recovery but the ambient magic is too low. It's a man dying of thirst in the desert.”

“You can tell all that?” the committee liaison asked. “How sophisticated is that drone?”

“I'm not at liberty to disclose that information.”

“What was able to do that to a gold-rank monster?” Farrah wondered aloud.

“We have been getting reports of monsters arriving already dead,” the tactical commander said. “The ritualists have been guessing that there's a problem with the

apertures. If that's what happened to the gold-ranker, we may have just gotten very, very lucky."

The tent got a little more crowded as Akari burst in.

"Is he back?" she asked Farrah.

"It turns out the gold-rank monster arrived all messed up," Farrah told her. "The commander, here, thinks we got lucky."

"You think it was Asano?" the commander asked. "Even if he's the most powerful category two on earth, he's still a category two. Doing that to a category four is impossible."

"Impossible is kind of his thing," Farrah said. "He does the impossible and then follows it up with either something idiotic or..."

She grinned as a dark shape emerged from the rainbow aperture.

"...an obnoxiously dramatic entrance."

They watched the drone footage as a large bird made of star-filled darkness flew slowly out of the rainbow light. It circled in the air over the gold-rank monster as the light inside collected together into two points, close together. The darkness reshaped itself into a cloak, fully enveloping a humanoid figure. The two points of light inside the hood were its only feature, forming a pair of bright silver eyes.

"The fidelity on this drone camera is amazing," the committee liaison said.

"That's what you took away from what you just saw?" the outpost commander asked.

"I just think we could really use some of these," the liaison said. "Who do I talk to about getting some?"

"You would have to speak to my commanding officer," the operator said.

"And how do I contact them?"

"I'm not at liberty to disclose that information. The monster appears to be speaking, so I'm activating audio surveillance."

On the screen, they saw the monster talking. As the audio kicked in they heard guttural words in a growling language, spoken in a voice filled with rage and pain.

"Does anyone understand that?" the tactical commander asked.

"It's hard to tell," Farrah said. "A lot of its mouth is gone, but I believe it said something about killing Jason over and over."

\*\*\*

"I warned you," Jason told King. "Your demise would be ugly and killing me would accomplish nothing."

"I'm not done killing you!"



Despite his words, King was a spent force, barely able to take staggering steps in Jason's direction. He conjured up a sword not for a weapon but for a walking stick, which proved to be a mistake when expending the mana worsened his condition. His recovery attribute was the hardest hit by the weak ambient magic and the one he needed the most. It was also the one most reliant on ambient magic, however, which left King's path to recovery cut off.

"I CAN'T BE KILLED BY THE LIKES OF YOU," King screamed, as much plea as assertion.

"I sympathise with your fate, so I'll make it as quick and painless as I can."

Jason raised an arm, pointing it at a spot over King's head.

*"Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death."*

He brought his hand down like a gavel as transcendent light shone down from the sky onto the almost helpless King.

The spell was not boosted by any of Jason's abilities yet was the single most powerful casting of his execute Jason had ever done. Execute powers inflicted exponential damage based on the condition of the target and the gold-ranker had survived damage that would kill any silver-ranker, monster or essence user. Half of King's flesh was already gone and he looked more like an unliving revenant than a living creature.

Even if Jason didn't have the ability to bypass rank suppression, the transcendent damage of his spell did. King was completely obscured in the radiant light of gold, silver and blue. When the light faded away, even the gold-rank monster had been unable to withstand it and was completely gone.

- 
- You have defeated [King of the Dinosaurs].
  - You have acquired a new title: [Giant Slayer].
  
  - [King of the Dinosaurs] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.
  - [Armour of the Dinosaur King] has been added to your inventory.
  - [Monster Core (Gold)] has been added to your inventory.
  
  - 10 [Gold Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 100 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 1000 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 10000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  
  - You have defeated a significantly more powerful enemy. Your [Defiant] ability has refined additional loot from [King of the Dinosaurs]:

- [Soul-Imprinting Triune] has been added to your inventory.
  - 100 [Gold Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 1000 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 10000 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 100000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 

Jason had not needed to breathe for more than a year, but he took a long, deep breath and slowly let it out. In the wake of his transformation and return to physical form, his body felt like lightning was running through it.

A horrified scream rang out and he turned his head. The drone he sensed hovering in the air was not the only thing drawn to the gold-rank aperture and Jason turned to see one of the intelligent, silver-rank dino-men looking at him in aghast disbelief.

Jason conjured his dagger and went to work.

## Chapter 370

### Enough Power

As Jason drained the life force from the dead monsters around him, the drone came down to hover in front of him.

“Jason,” Farrah’s voice came through it. “I can direct you back to the defence line.”

“Shade has brought me up to speed,” Jason said. “A lot of civilians were abandoned on this side of the line and a lot of them are still here, in hiding. Only the intelligent dinosaur-people have aura senses worth a damn, so there are a lot of survivors.”

“You need to come in for a debrief,” another voice said.

“Here’s my debrief. The gold-ranker is dead and there aren’t any more. There’s a lot of scared people here, so I’m going to go get them. If you feel like helping at all, let me know and I’ll be happy to coordinate with.”

“Bugger it, I’m in,” Farrah said.

“Farrah,” Asya’s voice came through. “I think you might be going a little native. How are you, Jason?”

“There are people who need me in action more than I need rest.”

“Akari will be in too,” Farrah said. “Can you send some Shades our way?”

“He’s sending bodies as the buses finish their current runs elsewhere. I’ll have him divert some to you.”

\*\*\*

Asya’s expression was dark as she left the drone operator’s tent.

“He is not alright, whatever he might say.”

“Of course he’s not,” Farrah agreed. “I bet that on the inside he’s tangled up like a sack of loose yarn you found at the back of your grandmother’s cupboard.”

“He needs to stop and rest,” Asya said.

“That’s the thinking of someone who wants what’s best for him,” Farrah said. “We need to think about what’s best for all the people in the restricted zone.”

“We don’t know what he’s been through, Farrah. Whatever happened in there with him and that category four monster, it turned him into a bird. That’s not how his flying power works.”

Farrah had a very good idea why Jason turned into a bird but she was the only one Jason had told the true nature of his ability to so she kept it to herself.

“He didn’t come in because he knows that when he stops, he’s staying stopped for a while,” Farrah said. “He needs to keep holding down the lid before it boils over.”

“Quite so,” Shade said, appearing next to them. “Mr Asano is quite strained but I have been with him long enough to know that he will not let himself rest until the job is done.”

“Clearing this city of monsters will take days, at best,” Asya said.

“Best not dally, then,” Shade said. “I have already acquired Miss Akari.”

Asya grimaced but gave a nod.

“They won’t resume evacuation until sweeper teams start clearing out the restricted zone,” she said. “I’ll see if I can divert some resources to help in the meantime. I can probably get the Americans with their drones to look for survivor clusters.”

“Now you’re talking,” Farrah said. “Shade, let’s go.”

\*\*\*

While the Network held off on more evacuations, just as Asya said, they didn’t waste time forming teams to clear out the restricted zone in preparation for doing so. That left Jason, Akari, Farrah and five buses marauding around, collecting survivors. The strike teams coordinated with them whenever they came across civilian clusters, While Jason’s mini-team directed strike teams toward monster herds.

Farrah rested on one of the buses more than fought, keeping herself fresh for when they needed maximum killing at maximum speed. Akari rested when she could, her endurance giving her a solid uptime. Jason never stopped at all and barely remained within the vicinity of the buses. He stayed in contact through his party interface while serving as scout and pathfinder.

Jason, Farrah and Akari fought only as necessary, but necessary turned out to be a lot. Active monster-slaying they left to the Network, yet they racked up no shortage of kills since the monsters were also going after the survivors. Fortunately, Jason had a new weapon against swarms of monsters.

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### New Title: [Giant Slayer]

- Overcoming a much stronger enemy has left a permanent mark on you that can be sensed by others. This may trigger a fear reaction from the unintelligent and the weak-willed if your aura is significantly stronger than theirs. Your actual rank being lower than theirs does not diminish the effect.

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Jason was aura-blasting herds of unintelligent dinosaurs into leaving an area, giving them the breathing room to get survivors out of whatever hole they were hiding in and onto a bus. If there was an intelligent dino-monster controlling them it didn’t work, but that let Jason know that there was prey to hunt.

On the day after the gold-rank monster fell, enough strike teams made up of Network silver-rankers were combing the restricted areas that other evacuation measures were authorised. The Cabal had participated in monster clearing but not civilian evacuation, as they often seemed like monsters themselves. Some complained that they seemed less like monsters than Jason Asano but exceptions were not made.

Even before the official resumption of evacuation in the restricted zones, a handful of others had joined Jason in bucking the Network's direction and running evacuations early. These were mostly silver-rank teams with at least one vehicle power.

Farrah went off for sleep on the second day, rejoining after half a day of rest. Akari did the same on day three. Jason not only didn't rest but barely even paused, replenishing himself on enemies and continuing to push forward. By the fifth day, even Farrah started looking at Jason with concern.

"Most of the survivors have been collected," she told him as he dropped off a busload of evacuees. "Most of the monsters are gone."

"Guarantee me that if I stop, no one will die that would have lived if I hadn't," he said.

"You know I can't do that."

"Then you know I can't stop."

He offered no further explanation and stepped back onto the bus. Farrah and Akari shared a concerned look as they followed.

They had all seen piles of dead in the previous days that dwarfed Broken Hill, with none of them coming out mentally unscathed. Jason barely spoke and as survivors became more scarce he increasingly threw himself into eradicating every monster they encountered. Giant dinosaurs were wiped from existence with cold, brutal efficiency. Jason's intensity was starting to scare the survivors they found.

The network forces had previously mapped out zones in the city and as the work progressed they started declaring them monster free. Holding teams were emplaced to make sure they stayed that way. A team of local network officials came by, flanked by silver-rankers to debrief Jason. He asked if they were the ones responsible for what happened and did not like their political answer about national sovereignty and passing off blame onto the Cabal. The silver rankers overlapped their auras to shield the officials from Jason's aura pressure before Jason stormed back out into the city.

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Adrien Barbou, now going by Mr East, looked at the paused image of a starlight bird and a zombie-like monster. Standing next to him was Mr North.

"Perhaps I was wrong in opposing the idea of killing him," Barbou said.

“Asano did not overpower the category four monster,” Mr North said. “He used environmental dangers, circumstance and opportunity.”

“It could be argued that the ability to do so is more of a threat than raw power, in which he does not fall short anyway. He is strong for his level and his power continues to grow

“Reports are that he will soon cross into category three, possibly even as a result of current events.”

“Enough power trumps all,” Mr North said, “and new power will not be enough for what comes next.”

Barbou narrowed his eyes at Mr North before schooling his expression. A smile teased at Mr North’s mouth.

“Speak your mind, Mr East.”

“It’s nothing.”

“I said speak,” Mr North demanded, his voice full of grave promise.

“It has occurred to me,” Barbou said reluctantly, “ that perhaps events have not slipped as far from their design as we all think. I have wondered, on occasion, if someone not only knew from the beginning what the ramifications would be but was also engineering those events to go exactly the way he wanted. If what seemed like plans going awry were actually masks in masks in masks. We are about to make what should be our endgame but you are looking further to things that are, to the rest of us, obscured in the dark.”

“I like you, Mr East. You see things that others overlook. You take fragments and recognise at least some of the whole.”

“Are you going to kill me, now?”

“No, Mr East. Good help is hard to find.”

\*\*\*

The aftermath of the Makassar disaster would affect the city for years to come but Jason’s part was done after eight days. The trip to Japan was postponed as he headed for home with Akari and Farrah in the back of Kaito’s helicopter, Kaito having configured the main section into a luxurious passenger compartment. Asya had remained behind as the requirements on the ground turned from the tactical to the logistical.

Jason had draped his heavily-damaged combat robe over his chair and was standing, looking at it. The robe, custom made for him by Gilbert Bertinelli had been a quiet champion for him but the magic in it had died. Despite its considerable powers of self-

repair, Jason had pushed it close to destruction many times, many of them during his desperate struggle in the latest proto-space.

Jason had a magic item that could increase the rank of a high-quality item and he had intended to use it on the robes once he reached silver rank. Now it was impossible and he carefully folded what was left of the garment and returned it to his inventory. He admonished himself for mourning the loss of a piece of clothing when tens of thousands were dead.

Farrah stood up and moved next to where he was staring at a now-empty chair. Although she had not been with Jason as he fought alone in the proto-space, they had faced the horrors of Makassar together. Once they found a school where a class full of children had hidden in a courtyard. The monsters had found them first and now Jason and Farrah had seen things they could never unsee. They gently leaned into each other for comfort.

“I miss Gary,” Farrah said. “I could use a big hairy ball of happiness right now.”

“I hesitate to say it,” Jason said, “since we could all use some comforting thoughts right now, but Gary didn’t take losing you well. I doubt he took losing me much better.”

“That’s alright,” Farrah said. “I can’t wait to see the look on his face when he sees us again.”

Jason turned his head to give her a sad smile.

“That’s a nice thought,” he said. “Now I have something to look forward to.”

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Jason stood under a dome in his cloud house, looking up at the water. From before Broken Hill and through a week in Makassar he had only slept once, keeping himself fuelled on spirit coins, as well as the mana and stamina he drained. Now that he was back, he still hadn’t slept.

In his time as an essence user, Jason had become completely convinced that essences did something to the mind that helped it process trauma. There was a limit, however, that in the wake of Broken Hill and then Makassar he had slammed into like it was a solid wall.

He knew that compared to the people in both places who lost their lives or their entire families, he had nothing to complain about. He had the power and the resources to keep himself and his family safe, which was exactly what had been done with Asano Village. It made him feel all the more guilty that he had done that while thousands of other families died.

He sensed Dawn at the airlock and opened the cloud house to her with a thought. Moments later she found him, standing in the same spot he had been in when she last left him.

“I’m sorry to come to you like this after what you’ve been through,” she said.

“What I went through is nothing,” Jason said. “The Makassar death toll officially crossed a hundred and fifty thousand today and they’re still counting the dead in piles. Literal piles of bodies.”

His voice cracked as he spoke, almost descending into sobs.

“I know,” Dawn said softly. “It doesn’t change the fact that you’ve seen horrors people never should. You need time to recover, which makes what I have to say hard.”

“I need to go to Japan,” he said.

“Yes. The grid could start going active in less than a week. Farrah estimates a little more, but time is short. We need that door before the world discovers it and its potential.”

“Alright,” Jason said.

“First you have to sleep,” she said. “A lot. After that, you need some meditation. It will help you get back into balance, but you know that.”

“I’ll cross into silver. I can feel it.”

“That’s why you’ve been stalling,” Dawn realised. “Silver rank feels like a reward you don’t deserve.”

“Everyone else got misery and death,” Jason said. “I get strength and power? How is that fair?”

“You can be a fool of the highest order, Jason Asano, but even you’re not fool enough to think the cosmos is fair.”

“It should be.”

“If you don’t like the way of things, then change them. All you need is enough power.”



## Bonus Chapter (Christmas 2020)

### Silver

Jason was on the roof of the main residence in Asano Village. There was a helicopter pad and, as would soon become important, the facilities to clean a helicopter. He didn't use the cloud house to meditate because the supply of diluted crystal wash that was the fuel for its cleaning functions was a limited resource. Once he crossed the line to silver, there would be quite a mess.

Jason had fed everything from purgation quintessence to high-grade cleaning chemicals into the cloud flask, to lessen its reliance on crystal wash. There had been some measure of success but it was ultimately stalling the inevitable. Jason had searched for a local substitute for crystal wash but there was, in the end, nothing quite like the original.

For this reason, Jason chose not to cross over into silver-rank in the cloud house where the finite supply of crystal wash would be tapped to clean some of the most intransigent filth it was possible to create. Instead, Jason chose the helicopter pad atop the main residence with its high-pressure cleaning systems. Farrah was watching over him, keeping her distance at the edge of the roof. She was not going to let anyone or anything interfere in one of the most important moments of Jason's life.

Standing at the edge of the roof, Farrah turned when she felt a surge of power behind her. What she saw was Jason in a cross-legged meditation pose, radiating silver light and floating an arm's length over the surface of the helipad. He unfolded his legs and dropped lightly to the rooftop.

Jason and Farrah shared a smile but she didn't move closer, knowing the process had only just begun. Soon enough, Jason moved into the purge phase of his rank-up, his body excreting much of its mass right through the pores of his skin. Although it had already diverged quite a lot from a human's, there was still flesh, blood and bone in Jason's bronze-rank body. It was broken down and purged, oozing out of his skin until the skin was rendered down as well.

Jason's body was rendered down to a glowing entity of light, shining through the filth that stubbornly clung to it as it floated in the air. A tide of magic washed out of him, arresting the attention of everyone in Asano village with magic or aura senses.

All around the village, those who had been given essences turned their head in Jason's direction. Some of the more distant ones set out to investigate, while the closer ones scrambled to get away from the crushingly oppressive strength of the aura projection.

In the medical centre, the handful of network personnel present felt like someone had walked over their grave.

Jason's aura continued to dominate the village as his body was remade within the silver light, growing from a kernel until a whole new body was in place, hidden under the muck. The light faded and he dropped to the rooftop, staggering but managing to keep his feet. Soon after, Farrah was washing him down with an industrial hose that would not have been out of place on a fire truck.

"How are you feeling?" she asked loudly.

"Like an inmate in a dystopian sci-fi prison movie," he called back as the powerful stream of water blasted him.

"You didn't pass out. That was good."

"I did get a bit woozy but my energy is coming back fast."

"That's your silver-rank recovery attribute at work."

He had also consumed a silver-rank spirit coin.

"You should take down some proto-spaces to get a handle on your freshly-advanced powers," Farrah suggested. "Especially since a good handful of your abilities ranked-up in a rush at the end."

"No time," Jason said. "I'm going to head for Japan today."

"Then I'm going with you. I've been cooped up with a bunch of ritualists for months but now there's nothing more to do than wait for the grid to come back online. Now that you've hit silver-rank, it's time for you and me to do some damage."

"It's a diplomatic trip," Jason said.

"Right up until it isn't," Farrah countered. "We should take my little apprentice, by the way."

As Farrah continued hosing him off, Jason thought about how adrift he had felt when he arrived in the other world. If Emi truly became an adventurer and joined his return to the other world, he wanted her as prepared as possible.

When Farrah was done, a thin film of hard-to-remove gunk still coated his new body. That much wouldn't be too taxing for a diluted crystal wash shower in the cloud house to remove. Jason opened up a portal to the cloud house but paused before stepping through.

"You're right," he said. "We'll have to talk to her mother."

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Jason felt like a live battery as he showered in the bathroom dome of the cloud house, still jittery from ranking up. Moving from bronze to silver was a significant jump in power and he could feel the magic moving through his body like an electrical current. He

could feel the ambient magic in the world around him, in the air and the water splashing against his skin. Jason's ability to control his own physiology had reached a new level and he was able to regrow his hair simply by concentrating.

As he was towelling himself off, he sensed Asya, Dawn and Farrah approach the cloud house through the underground tunnel. He also sensed something with them on the tram car. It appeared to be a large crate of magical materials. With his spirit attribute now silver-rank, his perception no longer strained under the constant threat of sensory overload. He'd been working on managing it ever since his perception power ranked up, but now what took effort was a matter of ease.

Jason moved through a tunnel from the bathroom dome into a lounge dome, pouring a tray of drinks as he waited for Shade to show them in. Farrah arrived carrying the crate, which was more a challenge of awkwardness than weight, given her prodigious strength. Although they were both silver-rank now, Jason's raw physical power was still no match for Farrah.

"That's quintessence," Jason said, his magical senses recognising the contents of the crate. "It's all silver rank. That's a fortune."

"The international community wanted to show their appreciation for your efforts in Makassar," Asya said. "You saved a lot of lives, both in stalling out the second proto-space and dealing with the category four."

"I got lucky," Jason said. "It was a confluence of circumstances unlikely to be repeated."

"Not long after we met," Farrah said, "I mentioned to Rufus that you were lucky. You know what he told me?"

"Knowing Rufus, probably something he heard from his grandfather."

"Of course it was," Farrah chuckled. "He said that great adventurers are the ones that turn opportunity into fortune. Or something like that. The point is that when the same thing keeps happening, good or bad, eventually you have to accept that it's not luck. It's you."

"You were not chosen by the World-Phoenix," Dawn said. "You were an opportunistic selection made available when you were drawn between worlds by happenstance, but we could have done far worse."

"Thank you," Jason said.

"We would have preferred Kaito, obviously," Dawn added, "but you can't have everything."

"That is ice cold," Asya said with a wincing chuckle as Jason looked at Dawn, slack-jawed.

"What kind of thing is that to say?" Jason asked.

"You punched my nose through my brain," Dawn said.

"What?" Asya asked.

"You're still complaining about that?" Jason asked.

"Coming from someone still angry they reused footage for the fourth season of Airwolf," Asya said. "I'm sorry, Jason, but that show was bad even before they cut the budget."

"I could swear this conversation started by thanking me for being great," Jason said. "It seems to have taken a turn."

"Nothing says thank you like a giant crate of quintessence," Farrah said.

"As I said," Asya explained, "the international community wanted to show their gratitude. The International Committee, the branches, everyone. China seemed especially grateful to avoid questions about a powerful secret weapon they didn't have to pull out."

"Asya had them dipping into their supplies for the good stuff," Farrah said.

"We know you've been trying to trade for certain hard-to-find materials for months," Asya said.

"What I've been after isn't enough to fill that crate," Jason said.

"I suggested we add in what you need to upgrade the cloud flask," Farrah said.

"Dawn gave us the specific requirements."

"Farrah, that's a fortune in materials on your world," Jason said. "On this one it's priceless."

"Jason," Asya said, "I'm not sure you understand how nervous the Network is about category four threats. Every solution we have is expensive, untested and almost certainly going to have outrageous collateral damage. At category four, even a monster dumb and slow enough to stand in front of our heavy weapons is still an iffy proposition. One that's smart and fast? The Chinese sent us a magically enhanced nuclear device. It was our final contingency."

"Also, shut up and take the loot," Farrah said. "What kind of idiot complains about a huge pile of treasure?"

"Are you going to tell us you didn't pay a price in Makassar?" Asya asked.

"Of course I did," Jason said. "But so did thousands of others, starting with the citizens of Makassar. Are they all getting crates full of treasure shipped to them?"

"You were Rufus' student more than mine," Farrah said. "It seems you've picked up his habit of measuring himself by his failures. No matter how powerful he becomes, how

skilled he is, he always focuses on the times he fell short. The people he couldn't help. I'm sure you saw it after I died."

"Yes," Jason acknowledged.

"It's the thing that makes him weak and holds him back," Farrah said. "You have your own flaws to be getting on with, so don't go taking his too."

"What flaws?" Jason asked.

"Are you serious? You believe in freedom but have the heart of a tyrant. You'll do what you think is right, regardless of what it costs or who gets in your way. That would be obnoxious enough if you were always right but you have a nasty habit of getting confident first and informed second. Do have any idea how much damage a self-righteous person with real power can do? Remember Anisa?"

Farrah shook her head.

"You have to recognise how much potential you have by now," she continued. "You're like Rufus in that so long as you get out of your own way, you're going to be one of the greats. More than me or Gary or even Emir. You just have to avoid destroying yourself along the way. Also, like Rufus, you're kind of a diva."

"A diva?"

"You were prone to melodrama long before you had magic," Asya said. "Also, your signature power is a sparkly cape."

"It's not a cape!"

"Look," Asya said. "The evacuees of Makassar are getting crates of food shipped to them because that's what they need. You got shipped a crate full of treasure because that's what you need. While you've been here ranking-up, Dawn and I have been briefing the Network on what happens after the grid comes back online. We need you as strong as you can be for that."

"Unless you think you're strong enough," Dawn added.

"There is no strong enough," Jason said.

"Which brings us back to you shutting up and taking the damn loot," Farrah said. "You can be such a pain to deal with sometimes. You turn the easiest thing in the world into a huge deal."

Jason looked around and saw three faces in agreement.

"Alright," Jason capitulated. "Give my thanks to whoever sent all this stuff."

"Oh, Terrance is going to have you record a bunch of thank you videos," Asya said.

"That's what he thinks," Jason muttered, wandering over to the crate. He hefted it up and shoved it into his inventory before opening his spirit vault and walking in, leaving the three women behind.

"Where is he portalling to?" Asya asked.

"It's not a portal," Farrah said. "That leads to his spirit vault. It's the inside of his soul. Kind of. I think. I'm not entirely clear on the specifics."

"Jason's semi-spiritual nature had allowed one of his abilities to create an actual physical realm," Dawn explained. "You might consider him to be a living astral space."

Asya looked at the archway.

"His soul is through there?"

"It's more complicated than that," Dawn said, "but, broadly speaking, yes."

"Are we allowed to go in?" Asya asked. "He didn't say anything either way."

"You can only go in if you trust him," Farrah said. "And I mean really trust him, no reservations. He's the god of that world and has complete power over you in there. Unless you have complete faith in him, your own soul won't let you in. Jason's opinion is that anyone who can get in is allowed in."

Farrah turned her gaze on Dawn.

"Maybe she's powerful enough to not fall under control."

"My true body, yes," Dawn said. "This avatar is incapable of entering Jason's vault. Or, more precisely, doing so would sever its link to my true self and it would die."

Asya moved hesitantly to the arch and raised a hand. It reached the darkness inside and stopped like it hit a wall.

"Complete trust isn't easy," Farrah reassured her. "It's okay to like him as much as you do and still have reservations."

"Can you get in?"

"When Jason and I were strangers and he was all but powerless, he threw himself into danger to save me and my companions. The kind of trust we're talking about comes from either a closeness you don't have yet or from walking through fire together. Just because you aren't there yet doesn't mean you don't care about him."

"It means I have reservations."

"Of course you do," Farrah said. "Only Erika, Emi and I have been in there. If you had that kind of trust at this point in your relationship, that would not be healthy. You actually getting through that archway would probably scare him off."

“It would denote an inappropriate level of emotional investment,” Dawn agreed. “Farrah does not want from him what you do. To trust as a friend and a companion is no small thing but does not require the same vulnerability as the kind of connection you want.”

“I trust Jason with my life,” Farrah said. “You probably would too, but the heart is a whole other thing. You’re ready to start exploring that, but it’s just that: the start. You are where you should be.”

“Thank you,” Asya said disconsolately.

“You should totally pin him down and knock one out though,” Farrah said. “He’s stressed and you’re so horny it’s leaking out of your aura, even with that suppression bracelet.”

While Asya looked scandalised, Farrah threw her the best impish Jason grin she could muster and ducked through the arch.

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Jason’s spirit vault had undergone another expansion and evolution with his ascension to silver-rank. The first thing Jason noticed that it was moving away from the stark black, white and red colours that had defined the previous iterations. Now the colours were more natural, and varied, less of a confronting assault on the senses.

The central pavilion was now a vast and elaborate series of interconnected, open-air buildings drawing on a mix of Asian and European styling. Jade, marble, bamboo and wood abounded, while at the centre there was still a four-sided pagoda.

The bottom floor of the pagoda held the four archways that were the centrepiece of the spirit vault. One archway was for Jason himself, through which he and Farrah emerged, while the others were for his familiars.

Even after dismissing their bronze-rank vessels, Jason could sense Colin and Gordon through the arches. Only if they decided to forgo being his familiars would that connection truly be lost as new astral beings took their places.

Materials started flying down from a hole in the ceiling, above which was the storage area higher in the pagoda. Blood quintessence flew down like a swarm of insects to dive into the archway that belonged to Colin. So long as he had the materials, Jason didn’t need the ritual to summon new vessels for his familiars, using the archways instead. He had only used the ritual with Shade as a publicity exercise.

Colin’s arch was the familiar obsidian, but instead of being filled with darkness like Jason’s portals, there was a sheet of wet blood. In the past, Colin’s new vessels had emerged in a rapidly escalating stream of leeches that piled up. This time, something wholly different emerged.

It was a humanoid figure, wrapped in a hooded cloak over combat robes, all dark red leather in shades of dried blood. It stepped forward with none of the clumsy stumblings of Colin's bronze-rank form, striding confidently up to Jason. It raised hands with the red-purple hue of a bruise and pushed back the hood. The face underneath was identical to Jason's except for the skin, which was the same dark colouration as the hands, and the eyes, which were glistening red orbs.

"Aren't you fancy," Jason said with a smile and held out a hand, palm up. "Would you like to show off a little?"

The Jason-clone exploded into a fountain of leeches, one of which landed on Jason's hand and he stroked it gently with his thumb.

"G'day, little mate."

The scattered leeches all shot out streamers of red leather, glistening wet, that converged on a central point and dragged the scattered leeches together, reforming the humanoid shape. The whole process happened in a flash, taking only a few seconds. Then Colin stepped forward and melted into Jason's body, vanishing in an instant.

Jason felt a connection to his familiar's biomass much greater than in the past. His new silver-rank body was akin to that of Colin's and rather than it vanishing entirely, like a normal summoned familiar, Colin seemed to at least partially have merged with him. It didn't bulk him out, but his already heavy body grew heavier still.

He suspected that his growing symbiosis with Colin was not just a factor of Colin's growing strength but also Jason's nature, blending spiritual and physical elements. He anticipated that more so than Shade or Gordon, there would be additional effects that he would need to explore over time.

One effect that was a result of Colin's new rank he could already sense and his body became shrouded in dark mist. His clothes vanished into his inventory, which in his spirit vault meant whipping off his body and flying up through the hole in the ceiling. Then his body became covered in a slick coating of blood, seeping through the pores in his skin. That blood thickened and solidified into a leather combat robe. It looked much like the one worn by Colin's new humanoid form, minus the hood and with an even darker red colouration.

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Item: [Sanguine Raiment] (silver rank, conjured)

*Conjured robes with the power and resilience of an apocalypse beast (armour, cloth/leather).*



- Effect: Increased resistance to damage. Highly effective against cutting and piercing damage, less effective against blunt damage.
  - Effect: Heal over time effects have increased strength and duration. This effect scales with the amount of familiar biomass being shared with the summoner and amplifies the passive healing the familiar provides.
  - Effect: Drain abilities have increased effect. This effect scales with the amount of familiar biomass being shared with the summoner.
  - Effect: Resistance to blood effects is significantly increased.
  - Effect: Can be used to make ranged grapple attacks. Health is continually drained from grappled enemies.
- 

The mist faded and Farrah looked Jason up and down. He conjured his cloak to complete the ensemble, shadow draped over dark red.

“Nice to see you embrace the ‘I’m coming to kill your children’ look,” Farrah said.

“It’s not that bad, is it?”

“It’s alright,” Farrah said. “You’re now the first person I’d think of if I woke up to find my livestock drained of blood, but it’s fine.”

“Wow. Alright, let’s see what Gordon has got going on.”

As with Colin, materials came flying down and into Gordon’s arch, a dark void containing the familiar eye nebula. Gordon’s new vessel floated out, looked much the same as before, with a disembodied cloak containing the blue and orange nebula in the chest. The difference was that instead of four blue and orange eye-spheres orbiting him, there were now six. The orbs were also slightly different than before as instead of half being predominantly orange and the other half blue, all six were an even mix of the two.

Gordon drifted closer and Jason reached out to touch him, to get a sense of the familiar’s new abilities. Unlike his other powers, the abilities of his familiars were not included with the description of the power that summoned them. When he touched Gordon, a list of the powers appeared and Jason raised his eyebrows as he read them.

“Bloody hell, Gordon.”

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“You look different,” Erika said as Jason walked into the study of the main residence. She put down the computer tablet she was working on and studied Jason’s face.

“I am different,” he said.

“You know if this keeps up, you and Kaito will look like twins.”

“That’s not uncommon,” Farrah said, following Jason through the door. “Siblings who are essence users often become quite similar, physically.”

“Great,” Jason said unhappily.

“I don’t see why you’re complaining,” Farrah said. “You’re the one who wins in that deal.”

Erika and Farrah laughed at the affront on Jason’s face, which then settled into a serious expression.

“What is it?” Erika asked.

“We need to talk about Emi,” Jason said.

“What about her?”

“I’d like to start taking her with me more as I do things. If the day does come where we’re in the other world, she needs as much experience under her belt as she can get.”

“Jason, I look at how different you are from the brother I grew up with. How much death have you seen in the last week? If you tell me that it didn’t mess you up, I’ll call you a liar and you want to drag my thirteen-year-old daughter closer to that?”

“I’m not talking about the violent stuff,” Jason said. “My friend Humphrey was fifteen when he received his essences but his mother wouldn’t let him become an adventurer until he was seventeen. She spent years before and after he claimed his essences in training and preparation, not just fighting but taking him around the world. Letting him experience different cultures and see the aspects of being an adventurer that aren’t about fighting and killing.”

“That’s easy to say,” Erika said. “What happens when things go wrong?”

“Of course they’re going to go wrong,” Jason said. “Hiding her away just means that she won’t be ready when they do. You said that I’m not the person I was before and that’s true. I was thrown into this with no foundation under my feet and I’ve been tumbling ever since. I want to give her the grounding that I never had.”

“We want to give her that,” Farrah added. “Jason talked about his friend Humphrey and my friend Rufus experienced much the same. Your daughter isn’t exactly a princess, Eri, but she isn’t exactly not, either.”

Erika rubbed a hand over her mouth thoughtfully.

“I don’t like it,” she said. “That being said, not liking something doesn’t make it go away. When are you leaving?”

“This afternoon,” Jason said.

“Then the answer is no,” Erika said. “I’m not going to allow this without taking the time to think it through and discuss it properly with my husband.”

“We can push it back to the morning,” Farrah said. “Give you the night.”

“We can?” Jason asked, looking at Farrah. “Alright, but I’ve delayed longer than I should already. We leave first thing, with Emi or without her.”

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A plane that looked more like a spaceship designed by ninjas hovered over the helipad of the Asano village main residence. The air rushing down to keep it aloft tore at the clothes of the people gathered underneath and made it impossible to talk. There were eight people present: Jason, Farrah, Dawn, Asya, Akari, Emi, Erika, her husband, Ian, and Jason and Erika’s grandmother, Yumi.

Yumi was unrecognisable from her previous self, now that she had received a full set of essences. Concerned about the infirmity of age, she had chosen essences designed to work around it. After lengthy discussions with Farrah, she chose the blood, flesh and bone essences, giving her the avatar confluence. As a result, she had been able to remake her body into an idealised version of her younger self, looking no older than Jason.

A heavy platform descended from the bottom of the plane, attached by cable on each corner. Ian kissed his wife and daughter a silent goodbye and watched as the others rose into the body of the plane. The moment the platform sealed them inside, the rushing air died off, allowing them to speak.

“Let’s go sit down so Shade can get some altitude without tipping us over,” Jason said.

The Japan party had expanded, Erika only allowing Emi to go with parental supervision. As Ian was busy with the medical centre, she decided to join the trip herself, passing the administrative tasks of the village over to her sister in law. Yumi had also gotten wind of the trip and added herself, which Jason had not resisted.

As they made their way from the room with the entry platform to the passenger compartment, the others looked around Shade’s plane form. It was the size of a private jet, and with Jason now silver-rank, there was no costly drain on his mana.

“I didn’t realise there were this many shades of black,” Yumi observed, looking around at the plane’s décor.

They settled into the flight and Yumi started probing Jason as to the actual purpose of the trip. Jason remained evasive, as the magic door that was their objective was a secret restricted to himself, Dawn, Farrah and Akari. He was happy to run the others on the plane around in conversational circles as it kept his mind occupied. The bloody events of the past week continued to prey on his mind and he found surrounding himself with friends and family to be a welcome distraction.

“Why isn’t Mike with us this time?” Jason asked.

“Aram is still in Makassar,” Asya explained. “There’s going to be a huge international contingent there for months, if not years. At least, there should be.”

“Problems?” Jason asked.

“The Indonesian government has been making noise about the Network coming in and taking over,” Asya explained. “They’ve been trying to seize control of Network assets, which has gone exactly as well as you’d expect. There’s also the lingering hostility with the local Cabal. The next battle in Makassar will be a diplomatic one.”

A few hours into the flight, one of Shade’s bodies appeared next to Asya.

“Miss Karadeniz, Mr Aram wishes to contact you quite urgently. If you would please follow me to the communications compartment.”

Asya followed Shade and came back a few minutes later as the plane shifted course. Jason frowned, remembering the news that caused a course-change on their last trip to Japan.

“Please tell me there isn’t another gold-rank proto-space that got missed,” he said to Asya.

“No,” she said, her expression grave. “The next battle in Makassar won’t be political after all.”

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On top of a semi-ruined building in Makassar, a portal arch rose up and Jason stepped through in his dark robes and starlight cloak. Jason had brought his full contingent of Shades, having left the rest of the passengers in Dili, which was just inside Jason’s new maximum portal range for reaching Makassar. His portal was only strong enough to transport one silver-ranker, so he had Farrah stored in his spirit vault. Now that they were both silver-rankers, that no longer prevented his portal ability from working. He opened another archway to let her out and they moved to the edge of the building.

The news out of Makassar had been horrifying and seeing it for themselves was even worse. From their vantage on the rooftop, they could see two-storey monstrosities of dead flesh and ugly steel. Zombie giants of flesh augmented by iron implants shambled through the streets.

Around the giants, the multitudes of dead victims of Makassar yet to be extracted from the ruins rose to join them as shambling dead. Jason’s fist clenched at his side as the bodies of the people he had failed to save the first time around were desecrated. He could sense the death magic emitted by the giants being invested into the corpses.

“For all that they’re monstrous,” Farrah said, “those things aren’t actual monsters.”

Jason pushed aside his fury, focusing on one of the giants. There was plenty of magic coursing through it, but as Farrah said, it was not the magic of a monster. It had the artificial feel of a living thing altered through magic, something Jason was familiar with.

“This feels like the Builder’s magic,” he said, his voice carrying the hard chill of permafrost. “Someone made those things.”

Extending his senses to the limit, he could sense the Network and Cabal presence already in conflict with the zombie giants and the army of the dead being animated around them. He vaulted off the edge of the building, gliding with his cloak as he aimed for the closest zombie giant.

Jason could sense it was silver-rank, as was the death magic it invested into the zombies rising up around it. That posed a potentially larger threat than the dinosaur monsters, through strength in numbers alone. The early death toll estimates were between one and two-hundred-thousand, which would be an ocean of silver-rank zombies. They knew the zombies would be far weaker than even the most meagre of silver-rank monsters, but a tsunami of them would be a terror to anyone without the power to deal with them.

Jason grimaced as he approached the ground, furious at being forced to take the fight to what had become victims in both life and death. Despite their unliving flesh, he did not draw his sword, having left it in his inventory. Instead, he conjured his dagger as he landed on the ground in front of the giant.

Gordon manifested next to Jason and immediately fired orange beams at the ordinary zombies slowly staggering in their direction. Each orb could now fire whichever of the two beam options was appropriate instead of being locked in, on top of the entirely new functions they had gained at silver rank.

With Gordon holding the slow-moving horde off, Jason chanted a spell at the giant.

*“Bleed for me.”*

After Jason chanted his spell, blood started flowing from the giant. Not the thick, black blood of the dead, but bright, red and fresh. Jason’s Haemorrhage spell added a new affliction at silver rank.

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- [Blood From a Stone] (affliction, magic): Negates immunity to blood and poison effects. This includes intrinsic immunities, such as from not having a biology or corporeal form. Entities without blood can bleed while under this effect. Cannot be cleansed while any blood or poison affliction is in effect.
- 

Jason cast another spell.

*“Carry the mark of your transgressions.”*

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- [Mortality] (affliction, magic): Negates immunity to curses. This includes intrinsic immunities such as from not having a soul or not being alive. Cannot be cleansed while any curse affliction is in effect.
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The giant slowly turned on Jason as his dagger shot out on the end of a shadow arm. His Hand of the Reaper power also added a new affliction to any attack made with his shadow arm.

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- [Weakness of the Flesh] (affliction, magic): Negates immunities to disease and necrotic damage. This includes intrinsic immunities, such as from not having a biology or corporeal form. Cannot be cleansed while any disease affliction is in effect.
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Jason went to work locking in the rest of his affliction suite, the sluggish monstrosity being strangely helpless for its rank. It had the resilience and strength of a silver-rank monster but the speed of an iron-rank, posing Jason no threat.

“Gordon,” Jason said and the familiar floated into the air, halting its beam attacks. All six of Gordon’s orbs left his orbit and flew down to disappear into the dead flesh of the giant. Although it would take a minute for Gordon to conjure up new orbs, the new affliction they delivered was worth it.

Six black butterflies with blue and orange wing colouration in the familiar eye pattern were conjured on the body of the giant, immediately flying off to land on and disappear into nearby zombies. Shortly thereafter, butterflies started manifesting on them, finding more zombies as they spread and spread until butterflies were streaming out of the entire zombie horde and the sky was thick with the beautiful orange and blue creatures.

The effect on the zombies was significantly less appealing than the colourful display in the air above them. Like the giant, their bodies started flowing with red blood and their already rotting flesh underwent rapid decomposition.

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- [Harbinger of Doom] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Continually drain mana from the victim to conjure a butterfly that seeks out nearby enemies. The butterflies are incorporeal and deal disruptive force damage in a small area when destroyed. Butterflies that contact enemies inflict one instance of each non-holy affliction present on the enemy it manifested from, including [Harbinger of Doom]. This effect cannot be cleansed while any other non-holy affliction is in effect. Additional instances can be accumulated. At the time of manifestation, one butterfly is generated for each instance of this affliction.
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Jason's full suite of afflictions was carried by every butterfly, moving out like the tide. He didn't even bother to fight anymore, watching the giant in front of him with malevolence as its body rotted. Even the iron and steel components of its body were bleeding and rotting as if they were flesh.

As the monster crumbled in front of him, Farrah approached. She had used her own chaining area attacks, so the zombies were not just rapidly decomposing but on fire as well.

"We need to find who did this," Jason said.

"Yes," Farrah agreed darkly. "These people had it bad enough, without being turned into grotesque, undead puppets. How do we find them, though?"

"I only know one group with access to the Builder's magic," Jason said. "We let the Network dig into it while we go to Japan."

"You think this is an attempt to stall us?"

"It's possible. We've delayed too much, in any case. We can see what the Network has dug up by the time we're done in Japan. Two angry people can't match the investigative power of the entire Network, after all."

## Chapter 371

### Old Affairs

The Four Cardinals of the EOA were sitting at the desk in their meeting chamber. On the wall, a news report was on the large screen.

“...Asano is believed to be responsible for what people are calling ‘the Butterflies of Makassar,’ which look so beautiful when filmed from high in the air, but once the colourful wave passed, only black-stained bones are left in their wake. Recently, in the wake of another humanitarian disaster, Asano was recorded warning the League of Heroes that his power was still growing. Many are speculating that we’ve seen exactly that as Asano joined top Global Defense Network members in putting a stop to the tide of wandering dead. GDN members from China and the US have made a big splash...”

Adrien Barbou silenced the report with a remote control. Although he was the new Mr East, he was already no longer the latest Cardinal to join the ranks. The new Mrs South spoke up.

“The Network will try and pin this on us,” she said.

“Was it us?” Barbou asked.

“Of course it wasn’t,” Mrs West barked. She was unhappy with the ally she had cultivated in Barbou being poached by Mr North but was not foolish enough to take it up with Mr North himself. Instead, she kept her ire for the new Mr East. “Why would we be insane enough to bring the world down on us when we’re about to make our final move?”

“Actually,” Mr North said, “I suspect we may bear a connection to this that could lead us to being liable if we don’t get to the one responsible first.”

“What connection?” Mrs West asked.

“We have not explored necromancy as a path to power in some years,” Mr North explained. “There was a time, however, when we did conduct some experiments using some of the unique methods to which we have access. I believe what we witnessed in Makassar was an extension of those long-discarded experiments. I can only postulate that the person continuing that research saw hundreds of thousands of dead as an opportunity for field trials.”

“You know who this is?” Mrs South asked.

“I have my suspicions. I believed the individual in question was long dead.”

“He was part of the joint research program,” Barbou guessed.

“Yes,” Mr North said. “The previous Mrs South was meant to have scrubbed all traces of the project but developments surrounding her defection have shown us that she was



less thorough than she reported. Mrs South, I will be expecting you to root out any more remnants your predecessor left unchecked. Mr East, I will give you what I have and you can try and beat the Network to the punch and find our necromancer first.”

“The Network has the old Mrs South,” Barbou said. “I’m unlikely to find him first unless you know something to give me a head start.”

“I do not,” Mr North said. “I fully anticipate the task being impossible, but we might get lucky. Mrs South, your task will be to dig up anything you can that your predecessor left on the joint research project. If the Network attempts to paint us as the perpetrators of Makassar, I want ammunition that paints us all the same colour.”

“And what about the final step in our plan?” Mrs West asked. “Will you be conducting that yourself?”

“I will leave the endgame in your capable hands,” Mr North told her. “I am handing off full control of the final stage to you.”

“You are?”

“I am aware that with the rapid changes in our leadership structure under the pressure of current events, you have not been entirely satisfied with the outcomes,” Mr North said. “I can think of no better demonstration that you are valued and trusted than to give you complete control over the final stage of the plan. You are versed in all the particulars and familiar with all the players. I have been preparing you for this for a long time, Mrs West.”

“Thank you,” Mrs West said, visibly shaken. “But if I’m going to be in charge of the final stage, then what are you going to be doing?”

“Revisiting old affairs,” Mr North said. “The time has come to make an acquaintance I have been anticipating for centuries before he was even born.”

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The Network’s category three tactical operatives once more poured into Makassar from around the world. This time the focus was on those with powers to contain the specific threat at hand, although most silver-rankers had some answer to numerical danger. Most essence abilities were tactical in nature and affected a small handful of targets at best. It was at silver-rank that most essence-users found themselves better equipped to confront groups.

The undead were not a danger in the way the monsters had been. The city had been evacuated of the living and the risen dead had individual strength akin to a low-end bronze monster, and a mediocre one at that. They also were slow and completely lacking in exotic

or even basic ranged attacks. This meant that bronze-rankers could be mobilised to add to the damage.

Unfortunately, the one area the zombies were at a silver-rank standard was in resilience. With silver-rank damage reduction and silver-rank durability, the ocean of animate dead was a difficult tide to push back. Rather than pour on less effective damage, the bronze-rankers were used to bait the unthinking undead, luring them into clusters to maximise the area attacks of the silver-rankers.

The undead were little threat to even bronze-rankers. The danger was not in confronting the hordes forming across the city but containing them. So long as they were kept from the evacuation points containing the city's surviving populace, the animate dead were a horrific but unimposing enemy.

After exhausting their mana and stamina, bronze and silver-rankers alike were pulled back to recover. The Network spared no expense in their use of spirit coins and potions to get them heading back out as quickly as possible. The biggest problem in dealing with the undead was their numbers and toughness although, in certain corners of the city, the dead were being swept aside as if by a cleansing wind.

A healer from the United States with the life essence had an aura that infused the people around him with life energy. Normally this increased the effectiveness of healing powers, which he could employ discriminately to affect only allies or everyone within the range of his aura. As one of the USA's elite, he fully explored the capability of his powers and found a potent interaction. When his life magic came into conflict with the death magic animating the zombies, the reaction was literally explosive, sending detonated gobbets of dead flesh scattering over the area. He could literally annihilate waves of undead, simply by walking amongst them as flying chunks of rot struck his force field and fell to the ground.

As the rest of his essences were magic, renewal and immortal, his abilities didn't just prevent him from becoming exhausted and needing to stop. He could also replenish other essence users, allowing him to keep them in the field for longer. He was one of a handful that, like Jason, combined a highly effective strategy with unflagging endurance.

The USA and China both finally demonstrated their power on the world stage, where Jason had so long been the focus of attention. Names that were already well known in their home countries were shown in their full power and glory since media were cleared to film from the air due to a lack of airborne danger.

Just as Jason, the US and Chinese silver-rankers were much more capable than the world standard. They demonstrated the fundamental truth that only in finding the synergies

within their own power set would an essence user truly become capable. Even so, only a few floated to the top as the richest cream, demonstrating both power and endurance.

Even with an estimated two hundred thousand zombies, there was a constant influx of powerhouse individuals who could fully unleash against a sluggish enemy with no tricks beyond numbers and toughness. Within twenty-four hours, the operation went from desperate containment to a mop-up. The strange, undead giants were dead and the zombies they had animated were reduced to a handful of isolated pockets.

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Jason left the cleanup to others, portalling back to Timor-Leste where he had left the others in the capital while he portalled to Makassar with Farrah. Shortly thereafter, a sleek black jet was winging them in the direction of Japan once more. Also aboard with Jason and Farrah were Asya, Akari, Dawn, Erika and Emi. Also joining them was Jason's grandmother, Yumi, whose essence combination had restored her youthful body.

"Do you think someone is trying to distract you from Japan?" Farrah asked Jason as they all sat together in a passenger cabin.

"No," Jason said. "I won't rule it out for the undead, given that someone was acting with deliberation, but I would count it as extremely unlikely. As for the original monster wave, not a chance."

"Agreed," Akari said. "No one is going to wipe out a city just to distract one person. With all the pieces that would have to be moved into place for a result that could only be counted as unreliable, it's simply not a feasible hypothesis."

"Good points," Farrah said. "If anything it would have been an assassination attempt. Bait Jason out, have him burn through his mana and strike while he's exposed."

"That didn't happen, though," Emi said, as her mother gave her a concerned glance. For the most part, Emi was staying quiet, listening and learning. She knew that her access to the adult conversations was predicated on not interrupting, however much she might *really* want to.

"Jason's new level of power meant that he was never pushed in terms of tactics or resources," Farrah said. "They may have given up without trying after seeing his new power level."

"It still seems like a stretch," Jason said. "The most likely scenario is that it had nothing to do with me. I'm not much more than a face on TV to most people. The real game is the EOA-Network-Cabal triangle. Makassar happened because, even now, they are jostling each other over petty power-grabs instead of what they should be doing. Outside of a PR perspective, they don't care about me that much."

“He’s right,” Asya said. “Jason matters a great deal to the Network internally, but because he’s always refused to subject himself to it, he’s immaterial to the political conflicts with the EOA and the Cabal. He’s been a part of this for less than a year, compared to decades or even centuries of tension and contest. Although he provides the Network with a lot, it’s not enough to tip those ancient scales.”

“I am left wondering how someone even got all of those unliving giant things into Makassar,” Akari said. “They are neither subtle nor small and there were so many of them.”

“Questions the Network is better equipped to deal with than us,” Jason said. “We should leave the investigation to them.”

“I’m not sure they’d want you anyway, after what you told that reporter,” Asya said. “Terrance was fuming when he called me after to give me an earful.”

“Let him fume,” Jason said.

“What did you say?” Yumi asked.

“That every magical faction bears some of the responsibility for Makassar,” Jason said.

“What you said was ‘blood is on every hand,’ which is going to be hitting news reports right around now,” Asya said.

“It’s not untrue,” Jason said. “The EOA caused the situation with the monsters while the Network and the Cabal were so busy scrabbling over petty territorial concerns that they let disaster through the gate they were meant to be guarding.”

“I believe Terrance wanted to lay this at the EOA’s feet.”

“HE DOESN'T GET TO!” Jason roared, leaping out of his chair. “You tell Terrance that if he's more interested in looking like the good guys than being the good guys, the relationship between the Network and myself is about to undergo a fundamental shift. If he wants me to spin the death and subsequent defilement of hundreds of thousands then he is free to come find me and see how that proposal goes when he makes it in person!”

Jason stormed out of the cabin towards the private sleeping cabins in the rear.

“Is Uncle Jason alright?” Emi asked, her voice hesitant in the tense atmosphere.

“He’s alright,” Erika said, reaching out to give her daughter’s hand a squeeze. “He just saw a lot of bad things lately. I’d be more worried if he wasn’t upset.”

“You can’t witness what was done to those poor people without getting angry,” Farrah said. “Unfortunately, we have nowhere to put that anger right now and we need to be cool-headed for when we arrive in Japan. I think your uncle is just trying to burn off some frustration, even if he doesn’t realise that’s what he’s doing.”

Farrah stood up.

“Speaking of which,” she said, “I’m going to take some time for myself. I’ve only seen a zombie horde like that once before, when I was a new adventurer, and this was much worse. Your movies fail to capture the true horror of watching people reduced to grotesque marionettes.”

She also headed for the sleeping cabins.

## Chapter 372

### End Run

As Shade, in his plane form, continued winging towards Japan, Jason was laying on the bed in a small sleeping cabin. Fresh from the land of the dead that Makassar had become, his mind was troubled. He looked at the door; there was no knock but he felt Asya's presence on the other side.

"Come in," he said.

She entered hesitantly, unconsciously touching a hand to the aura-suppression bracelet that kept her from broadcasting her emotions. She had aura control training but Jason's senses were strong enough that he would passively pick up on them anyway until she was stronger.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," Asya said. "Erika thought that maybe you need someone to talk to instead of brooding it out. She said that was your go-to move but you don't have another six years to learn it isn't very effective."

Jason chuckled, despite himself, and sat up on the bed. He patted the spot next to him, even though there was a free chair.

"I'm trying to be healthier," he said and she sat down.

"I don't want to complain," he continued. "Not when I've just been to a place where not only did so many die horribly but they weren't even allowed to rest in peace."

"You're entitled to your feelings," Asya said. "Just because someone else is miserable doesn't mean you aren't allowed to be unhappy for yourself. You just have to keep it in perspective."

He gave her a sad smile, bumping his shoulder genially into hers.

"Thanks," he said. "I learned back in debate club that you were smarter than me. And better organised. It's why I always tried to throw you off with weirdness."

"You try and throw everyone off with weirdness."

"Yeah, but I eventually spotted the little streak of weird in you too. You hide it under all this well-groomed competence but I remember when I was using the difference between vehicle Voltron and Lion Voltron as an analogy for the positive aspects of authoritarianism and you completely turned it around on me, without missing beat."

"I remember that," she chuckled.

"I almost asked you out after that."

"Seriously?"

"Princess Asya was not meant to have even heard of Voltron, let alone know that much about vehicle Voltron, even though it's the crap one. Be still my heart."

"But you didn't ask me out."

"No," he said, shoulders slumping. "You know how it was."

"I do," she said sadly. "Can I be honest?"

"Always."

"I've always hated Amy's guts."

Jason burst out laughing.

"I think we can add character judgement to the list of things you're better at than I am. Although I'm pretty sure, at this point, the list is just most of the things."

"Don't sell yourself short, Jason. Do you have any idea how intimidating you are?"

"Of course I am. I have spooky magic powers."

"Not like that," she said. "Not to strangers. I'm talking about to people who know you. I was born with every advantage. My family had money and influence. My education was the best, not just the academy but private tutors, international study trips just for me and my brothers. I had so much going for me and I worked so hard to make the most of it. I had this life plan. Federal police. Federal bureaucrat. Federal office. I was going to be Prime Minister one day."

"I believe you," Jason said sincerely. "If that still happens, please do something about media monopolisation."

"I'll see what I can do," she laughed, "but don't get your hopes up. When the Network recruited me, I discovered a whole new world where I could not just do but become things I never imagined."

"When I discovered magic I found out I could get hit with a shovel a lot and then sacrificed."

"My introduction was more measured," she said, "but it was also more shackled. You were thrown in a world full of wildness and danger and you didn't just survive, but thrive."

"Technically I didn't survive," he said.

"Life threw you in the fire and you came out reforged. You came back, striding across the world like you owned it. You were always confident, Jason, but there was a hollowness to it. After getting to know you, I realised that a lot of it was façade. Not anymore."

"I was a teenager. Of course it was empty confidence."

"When the Network recruited me, I was so impressed with myself for becoming a person worthy of being drawn into a world of magic. But you were literally drawn into a world of magic, facing dangers and having experiences I can't imagine, even now. Being a

functionary for the Network seemed so amazing until you let me see your recordings. The things you saw. The things you did.”

Jason bowed his head.

“There’s so much those recording don’t show,” he said. “I was so scared. And when I thought about coming home, I was thinking of Erika cooking barbecue by the beach while I played with Emi. Not wading through an army of the dead that I failed to save in the first place.”

He bowed his head.

“I don’t think I’m built for this,” he whispered. “I’m not the guy who saves the world. I’m the comic relief sidekick.”

“No one is asking you to save the world.”

“We haven’t told you the real reason we’re so adamant about getting to Japan, have we? I’m sure you’ve realised it’s more than just visiting the Asano clan.”

“I assumed you’d tell me when you are ready. My being part of the Network complicates things, I know.”

He turned to look directly at her.

“I’ve always found that trusting in people, rather than the groups they belong to, has always steered me right. I don’t trust the Network to do what’s right or best, but I trust you to at least try.”

She smiled.

“You’re not a comic relief sidekick, Jason. You’re a bunny-ears lawyer.”

“You think so?”

“No one is ambivalent to you Jason. I hate to break it to you, but as long as I’ve known you, everyone has either really liked you or *really* didn’t but put up with you for one reason or another. Anna would put you in a rocket and fire you into the sun if not for the loot hose you’ve been spraying into her branch.”

“I got that impression.”

“I’ve been on both sides of that coin. When you first swaggered into debate club, spewing nonsense at a hundred kilometres an hour, I wanted you gone so badly. Your actual debate skills were never great, but you always had that way of pulling people into your pace. So I tolerated you until I realised I wasn’t just tolerating you anymore. You’d dug under my skin, like a tick.”

“Like a tick? Any chance of getting a better simile?”

“Nope,” she said with a grin. “You are everything I should hate. I prepare, you improvise. I’m professional; you’re casual to the point of self-destructiveness. I always take



the best path while you blow up the path, use it to make a new path that's all wonky and doesn't go the right way, yet somehow you get where you're going. Mostly."

"The trick is to not worry about the destination."

"I always worry about the destination. You take the risks I never would, with the courage to accept the consequences I never could."

"You make me sound kind of awesome."

"This would be the part where you tell me the things you like about me."

"Oh, I hated you too. So stuck up, as if meeting people's expectations was some kind of higher calling. Obviously, I was attracted anyway. I was sixteen and you were so smart and sharp, like an evil lady torturer. Plus, you already looked like the winning entry in a design an absurdly gorgeous woman contest."

"I'm not sure you understand how compliments work."

"I told you that I hated you at the start. I thought you were just another rich-prick automaton, built from your parents' money. Then I started catching glimpses behind the curtain. Why did a rich girl in 2010 know anything about Tom Selleck's moustache? Then there was the way you throw yourself so hard into everything. You put on this reserved face but you show your passion with how much you invest in everything you do. That was kind of annoying in debate club but watching you kite surf was one of the sexiest things I have ever seen. How were you that good?"

"I took lessons."

"Of course you did. It makes total sense that you tried to join the Federal Police, overshot and wound up in the magic police. I bet you overdid it there, too."

"I originally signed up for tactical," she admitted. "I wanted to learn how to use my powers properly. They let me do the training because they let anyone with an essence set, but they pushed me into a management track. It turned out to be a blessing in disguise since I never ended up using cores."

Jason chuckled.

"That drive you have is still very sexy."

"Most men I meet don't like that about me," she whispered. "They want to slow me down, bring me to heel. They look at everything I've done for my own ambition like I'm filling out my wife resume and expect me to give it up and settle down."

"You must know a lot of really dumb guys."

"My mother likes to set me up. I never really got over this weirdo I knew in high school, though."

"He must have been really good looking."

“He had a chin that could cut glass, but he’s had a lot of work done.”

“I have not had any work do—”

His indignation was cut off by a pair of soft lips pressing into his.

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When Jason and Asya returned to the main cabin, all eyes turned to them.

“What?” Jason asked.

Erika shook her head, although a smile played at the corners of her mouth.

“You could at least be a little discreet,” Yumi told him.

“Shade,” Jason whispered. “Did you soundproof the cabin like I told you?”

“You can’t soundproof social cues, Mr Asano.”

“Yeah, that’s fair. Where’s Emi?”

“In the cockpit,” Shade said. “I’m teaching her to fly a plane.”

“Oh, nice.”

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Jason and Erika were sitting in the cockpit together while Emi was back telling her great grandmother all about what she’d learned. They relaxed with glasses of ice tea and looked out at the open sky.

“So, Asya,” Erika said.

“Uh, yeah. I know it doesn’t seem like the time.”

“It’s exactly the time,” Erika said. “I’ve been watching you pull deeper and deeper into yourself, Jason and I’ve seen where that leads when the only ones relying on you are me and Emi. I don’t want to see that when the stakes are so much higher. In times like these, you should take the joys you can find.”

“Thanks.”

“Maybe next time don’t take them in a confined space with my daughter nearby.”

“Sorry. It wasn’t really planned.”

“So, is this a thing, now, or were you just blowing off steam?”

“We haven’t talked about it but it’s a thing. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have concerns, though.”

“Like your plans to traipse off to another universe?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you worried that she’ll want to go with you, or that she won’t?”

“I don’t know. Both, somehow, if that makes any sense. My biggest worry is that she’s more invested than I am, emotionally. I’m not saying I don’t feel anything, but she’s further down that road than I am.”

“Baby brother, it doesn’t matter where you are now. It matters where you’re going. If you both end up in the same place, then great. If not, then you have bigger concerns than a relationship that didn’t work. Try and figure it out before you drag her off to another universe, though, yeah?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“She had a thing for you back in school, right?”

“It wasn’t wholly unreciprocated,” Jason said. “But then Amy…”

“Did it never occur to you that Amy finally taking you off the shelf right as you took a healthy interest in someone else wasn’t a coincidence?”

“I’m not a complete idiot.”

Erika looked at him from under raised eyebrows.

“I’m not!”

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Emi was back in the cockpit while Jason watched her listen to Shade's flight instructions with an adorable look of concentration on her face. Asya opened the door, calling Jason back into the main cabin with the other passengers.

“I was just contacted by the Network,” Asya explained. “Details are still sketchy, but it’s looking like as many as nineteen countries are about to divest themselves from the Network.”

“Divest themselves how?” Farrah asked.

“The information I have suggests it will vary by country,” Asya explained. “We don’t have anything solid yet but none of it is good. Reports are ranging from expelling Network personnel to forcibly seizing Network infrastructure.”

“Doing that now is madness,” Akari said.

“No,” Jason said. “The grid is about to come back online. Assuming you knew that, it would be the perfect time to swoop in.”

“He’s right,” Asya said. “The EOA are making their end run. All the countries in question are having them take on the Network’s responsibilities.”

“The EOA doesn’t have the people or the resources,” Farrah said. “Or access to the grid.”

“Which is about to put the Network in an awkward position,” Asya said. “Does the Network fight the local government and stay present anyway? If we do, suddenly we look like a despotic force and support for us around the world dries up. If we accept being tossed out, suddenly we have a nasty choice. Either leave those nations to be overrun by

monster waves, or give the EOA the tools, knowledge and access to the grid to stop them.”

“Giving the EOA the legitimacy and power it has always been after,” Jason said.

“Which countries?”

“Indonesia is the lynchpin,” Asya said. “They aren’t happy about magical factions either ignoring or running roughshod over them. The EOA swooped in and made similar approaches to other nations. Venezuela, Myanmar, North Korea, Iran, Turkey, the Philippines, Taiwan.”

“Taiwan?” Jason asked.

“The Network is very established in China.”

“Ah.”

“What is the Network’s response?” Farrah asked.

“I don’t know,” Asya said.

“It doesn’t change what we have to do,” Jason said. “Not unless Japan is on that list.”

“It’s not,” Asya said.

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “It’s not like we could do anything about it, anyway. We do what we can do and leave diplomacy to the diplomats.”

## Chapter 373

### Giving Face

“Are we landing at Kansai International Airport?” Emi asked as she emerged from the cockpit. “It’s on an artificial island.”

Jason looked up from the book of astral magic theory he was reading.

“Sorry, moppet,” Jason told her. “I’d love to do some exploring with you but we’ve already had too many delays. Dropping right out of the sky should be fun, though, right?”

“What do you mean, right out the sky?” Erika asked.

“We’re going to fly right over Ashiya and jet suit down,” Jason explained.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Erika said. “I must have totally forgotten when you explained that YOU’RE GOING TO THROW US ALL OUT OF AN AEROPLANE!”

“Totally understandable,” Jason genially acknowledged. “It’s a busy time for everyone, so slips of the mind are only to be expected. Do we have an ETA, Shade?”

“I will be starting the descent to drop height in approximately nine minutes,” Shade said.

“You’ve told them we’re about to arrive, right?” Jason asked Akari.

“Yes, I already got the estimated time from Shade and notified my father,” Akari said. “He was a little thrown when I told him how we’d be arriving, but we’re part of the Network, so very little is truly extraordinary.”

“Oh, so you told her about the jumping out a plane thing,” Erika said.

“We can’t go keeping things from her, Eri,” Jason said. “It may be distant but she’s family.”

“I’m your sister!”

“Exactly. Family is important,” Jason said.

“Shade,” Erika said. “Is there any chance you could drop Jason out of the plane now?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs Asano, but I believe Mr Asano is a necessary presence when we meet the Asano clan.”

“Fine,” she grumbled.

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In a smaller cabin at the rear of the plane, Jason and Akari went over some last-minute details in preparation for meeting the Asano clan. It wasn’t anything they hadn’t already gone over but Jason wanted to be fresh when they hit the ground. When they were done, they stood up to join the others in the main cabin.

“Before we go,” Akari said, “are you sure that you’re up to this?”

“I’ll try not to take offence at that.”

“I’m just saying that you’ve been through a lot recently. Broken Hill and then Makassar, twice.”

“It’s bad, yeah,” Jason said. “But that’s the job.”

“Is it your job? You never actually joined the network.”

“No, I joined the Adventure Society, which means putting myself between the bad things and the people who aren’t equipped to face them. Jumping worlds doesn’t change that.”

“And this Adventure Society is some bastion of virtue, compared to the network?”

“Of course not, but they let you make your own choices. You just have to be willing to live with the consequences. My friend Rufus taught me that.”

“He also picked up some of Rufus’ bad habits,” Farrah said, opening the door. “Get in here; we’re about to jump out of a plane.”

Jason and Akari went in finding the rest of the passengers waiting for them.

“You know, it’s a lot easier to deflate Rufus’ sense of self-importance,” Farrah said. “He’s not actually responsible for saving the world.”

“What exactly are you saving the world from?” Asya asked. “The monster waves?”

“That’s a symptom,” Jason said. “I can leave that to the Network, ultimately. My concern is that they’re going to make the disease worse.”

“How?” Asya asked.

“Imagine a house on stilts,” Jason said. “There are so many stilts that the house is nice and stable until someone comes along and starts messing with the stilts and introduces a decaying factor. Magic termites or something. Things get wonky and people start taking a look at the stilts. They figure out how to slow down the decay, but then they realise that the stilts are made of solid gold. Do you trust them to leave the gold where it is because it’s keeping the house from collapsing?”

“What are you saying?” Asya asked.

“He’s saying,” Farrah said, “that after the grid comes back up, there’s going to be a magical gold rush. Unfortunately, every lump of gold that’s dug up brings your world a little closer to collapsing. There’s a lot of gold down there, so it won’t seem like anything is happening at first. By the time you start noticing the effects, it will be too late.”

“That’s why you didn’t tell me before. You don’t trust the Network.”

“No,” Jason said. “I trust people, not institutions. I’ll trust the people in the Network or the Adventure Society, but as a whole, you have to be careful.”

"The Network won't do something destructive to the world," Asya said. "They wouldn't."

"I hope that's true," Jason said. "But when they see the Cabal and the EOA reaping the benefits, will the Network really stand still? Every branch?"

Asya looked uneasy, not answering. Jason put comforting hands on her shoulders.

"I'll give you a proper, thorough explanation once we're on the ground and settled. I just need to get my hands on something before anyone else finds out about it."

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "We are approaching the drop zone."

"Alright," Jason said. "Everyone hold still while Shade suits us up."

Jason and Farrah could both fly but were put in jet suits anyway, for better flight uniformity.

"This is awesome," Emi said.

"It's reckless," Erika said. "Planes are meant for landing."

"Technically, he's not a plane," Jason said. "He's the living shadow of death itself. Actually, that doesn't make it sound safer, does it?"

"No," Erika said, drilling a glare into him. "No, it doesn't."

"I anticipate it being a novel experience," Yumi confided in Emi. "I've been back to Japan several times since I was young, but this promises to be a rather unique visit from the outset."

"See?" Jason asked. "Even Nanna is keen."

Yumi's glare joined Erika's in latching onto Jason.

"See?" Jason asked. "Even Grandmother is keen. It feels weird calling you Grandmother when we look the same age. Can I just call you Yumi?"

"No," Yumi said definitively.

"Are we okay to use these from all the way up here?" Emi asked. "All the videos I've seen of suits like this are really low altitude and usually over water."

"That's just a safety precaution," Jason said. "They can go way higher, so we can ignore that restriction."

"That really seems like something we shouldn't ignore," Erika said.

"Shade is very reliable," Jason assured her.

"Mrs Asano," Shade said. "Be confident that I will not let anything happen to Miss Emi. As with the plane form which you currently occupy, these jet suit designs incorporate magic along with design aspects from a reality more technologically advanced than your own."

“How do we get out of the plane?” Emi asked. “Do we use that platform we boarded with, under the plane?”

Erika spotted Jason’s grin and a look of horror crossed her face.

“Don’t you dare,” she warned him.

“It’s just efficient, Eri,” Jason said. “Shade, if you would?”

The plane around them exploded into a cloud of darkness, dumping the passengers into the sky.

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In the city of Ashiya, near Kobe, the Asano clan compound had been constructed across hills overlooking Osaka Bay. In a place where space was at a premium, the land value alone was astronomical, let alone the buildings that occupied it. Designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and built twenty years before World War Two began, the famous American architect’s mastery of spatial composition incorporated the hills into the design of the buildings. The compound had four levels, yet no individual location was greater than two storeys.

With Shade controlling the flight suits, eight figures dropped out of the sky. Jason, Akari, Asya, Dawn, Farrah, Yumi, Erika and Emi, all flying in a V-formation as they swooped over the landscape to touch down in a courtyard in front of a waiting group, also of eight. The jet suits landed in front of the group in a line, keeping their distance so as not to blast too much air over the people awaiting them.

The jet suits turned into shadows, all zipping into Jason’s shadow like they were being sucked into a void. This left Jason flanked by friends and family, all dressed formally. Jason was wearing one of his remaining suits from the other world, a dark and dignified outfit designed specifically for such meetings. Jason’s general lack of formality had left him little reason to pull it out previously.

Both groups stepped forward and Jason noticed that the other group had been matched to his own, including a female elder and a girl in her early teens. They even matched up in rank, except for Dawn’s counterpart. Despite Dawn being, by any detectable measure, normal rank, her counterpart was a woman who looked to be in her mid-thirties but whose rank was near the peak of silver. Outside of Dawn’s true rank, the woman was the most powerful member of either group. She also bore a solid resemblance to Akari.

All of the Asano clan wore western-style business attire. The man in the middle, Jason’s counterpart, was Akari’s silver-rank father and patriarch of the Asano clan. Like



Jason's eldest paternal uncle, Ken and Hiro's older brother, the patriarch was named Shiro.

"Mr Asano," Shiro greeted with a polite bow.

"Mr Asano," Jason greeted back, reciprocating the bow.

"First," Jason said, "allow me to apologise in advance. In spite of my heritage, I do not know your culture well and am certain to make blunders in my decorum. Please know that any slight is unintended and is a result of my ignorance alone and not any absence of respect."

"Thank you, Mr Asano. I too would like to apologise for the pretence under which I sent my daughter to you. We presumed to judge your worthiness to the Asano name, only for you to make that name echo across the world."

"These are difficult and dangerous times, Patriarch. I understand your position and the need to act delicately. I took no offence at all."

Jason took an elaborate wooden box from his inventory. It was unremarkable magically, being only a mildly-reinforced iron-rank container. It looked well-made but otherwise ordinary. What made it special was twofold: that it had come from the other world, as well as the gold-rank magic detectable on the object within.

"I offer a gift as a gesture of respect to the Asano clan," Jason said, gently setting the box down between them. "This container comes from another universe. It was the packaging for a suit of armour that was made for me there and I have long used it to organise many magical items from the other world. The armour that came with it was ultimately destroyed in the category four astral space in Makassar, so it seemed appropriate that I use it to store a new set of armour I obtained there."

Jason opened up the box, revealing the folded set of armour mixing cloth, leather and hard chitin plates. It had been worn by the dinosaur man, King, and almost destroyed passing out of the astral space. A gold-rank item was a gold-rank item, however, and over time, it repaired itself and was fully restored.

"It is called the Armour of the Dinosaur King. I hope that should any member of your clan reach category four, this armour can help vouchsafe their life."

Jason felt tremors run through the auras of the Asano clan members at being presented a set of gold-rank armour, although their demeanour did not shift, aside from the briefest glare Shiro flashed his daughter, standing next to Jason. The patriarch took out a box of his own, this one a plastic container with an image Jason recognised on the side. The patriarch looked embarrassed as he placed it next to Jason's box.

"Next to your gift," Shiro said, "I can only make a paltry offering in reciprocation. This is a framed set of animation cels from *Beast King GoLion*."

Jason's face lit up in a grin.

"Seriously? That's awesome."

"You need not be polite, Mr Asano. Our gift pales in comparison to the treasure you have given."

Jason gave Shiro a smile.

"I disagree, Patriarch. The true worth of a gift is not in the value but the sentiment. Does not a mother value a handmade card from their child over an expensive one bought from a store? My gift is simply something that I came across in my travels, while your gift demonstrates thoughtfulness, care and effort. My father will be truly delighted when I show him what you have given me."

Jason picked up the box containing the Asano clan's gift and placed it in his inventory. The woman standing next to Shiro conjured a silver cabinet and placed Jason's gift inside, after which the cabinet vanished.

Jason gave another respectful bow.

"Your consideration humbles me, Patriarch."

"As your generosity does me, Mr Asano."

Shiro turned to the woman who had conjured the cabinet, a silver-ranker standing across from Farrah. She bore quite a resemblance to Akari.

"This is my younger daughter, Asano Mei," Shiro introduced. "Please allow her to escort you to your accommodations while I take the chance to catch up with my long-absent elder daughter. You can rest after your journey and I will have refreshments sent to you. Later, if you are amenable, I will give you a tour of our home."

"We thank you for your hospitality," Jason said, allowing himself and the rest of his group, barring Akari, to be led away.

Most of Shiro's party left as well, once Jason and his group were out of sight. That left Akari, Shiro, and the powerful silver-ranker that was Akari's grandmother. Shiro cracked a huge smile and gathered his daughter in a huge hug.

"I missed you, child."

"And I, you, father."

"This man you have brought back. He is not what I expected."

"He never is," Akari said.

"He may not know our ways, but he does know how to give face."

“I will admit that surprised me,” Akari said. “I half expected him to arrive in a floral-print shirt, board shorts and sandals. I even suspect he’s putting on a more formal display just to mess with me, having guessed what I reported back to you. I am sorry about my judgement on the gift. I don’t know what he originally intended to offer, but I doubt it could be as grand as a treasure taken from the first category four monster to arrive on Earth. He didn’t tell me that he even had it, let alone that he would gift it to us.”

“He put on quite the display,” Akari’s grandmother said, claiming her granddaughter for a hug of her own. “It makes me wonder what he wants from us.”

“It’s about the Tiwari clan,” Akari said. “He knows more than I was willing to communicate until I saw you in person.”

“Because of this Dawn person?” Shiro asked.

“Yes.”

“You were very vague, only stating that we must show her the utmost respect of an elder. Are you ready to tell us more?”

“Of course,” Akari said. “Let us go inside and I will explain everything.”

## Chapter 374

### Not In a Position to Criticise

In a quiet dojo, Akari and her father faced off, each wearing a gi, a suppression collar and holding a wooden sword. The swords and the room were both parts of an integrated magical system where the swords would not deal damage but inflict numbing pain that would briefly paralyse, in accordance with both the location struck and the force of the strike.

At the side of the room, Jason was in a relaxed kneel, also wearing a gi and suppression collar. Kneeling to one side of him was his grandmother, Yumi, with Emi on the other.

“I have always held, Mr Asano,” Shiro said, “that to truly know a person, you must cross swords with them. To master the blade, you must put yourself into it, mind and spirit in alignment. To a blade master, your sword is who you are.”

“That would mean that you can only really know someone if they happen to be really good with a sword,” Jason said. “That’s a pretty small sample size.”

Shiro chuckled.

“Sadly true.”

“What if I got one of those bendy swords you hide in a belt?”

Shiro laughed again.

“Simply suggesting it tells me a great deal about you, Mr Asano. If you actually did it, that would tell me something more. Should you then wield it against me, I would truly have your measure. This method is more flexible than you may think. For example, my daughter has been away for some time. If and how her sword has progressed in that time will enlighten me both on her and on you, who has been her sparring partner in that time.”

Jason took the cue to fall silent as Shiro refocused on his daughter. They started circling one another with careful footsteps.

“Where has my aggressive daughter gone?” Shiro provoked. “Has your time away filled your heart with doubt?”

“You are the teacher and I the student, father,” Akari responded calmly. “It is not for me to instruct you on the difference between hesitation and consideration.”

“Interesting,” Shiro said. “Are you a man whose sharpest blade is his tongue, Mr Asano?”

“Yes,” Yumi said, answering for her grandson. Emi smothered a little laugh.

“Have you lost your boldness, Daughter?”

“Perhaps I have merely learned to spot the difference between boldness and reckl—”

Without warning, Akari shot into action mid-sentence, launching into a barrage of strikes that had her father moving back in measured steps as he fended off attacks. It was spectacular to behold, as the speed and agility of silver-rankers made a swordfight more akin to film choreography than a fight between normal humans. Not only were reaction times, balance and spatial awareness vastly heightened, but even if the swords were real, no single blow would land a debilitating strike. Silver-rankers were just too hard to put down.

The factors affecting the combatants led to longer exchanges, with greater risks taken and the action-movie clashing of blades in rapid succession. Akari’s father calmly withstood his daughter’s barrage, slowly clawing back control of the lengthy exchange. He had been on the end of such turnarounds many times while sparring with Akari during her residence at Asano Village. Shiro launched into a counterattack, making his own sequence of unrelenting attacks until Akari deftly disengaged, dancing lightly back.

“You have sharpened your aggression from a blunt stick to a sharpened stick,” Shiro told his daughter. “It is not a sword yet, but you have made impressive progress. It seems that broadening your experience has had a positive influence. Let us see which other flaws you have managed to work on.”

Moving to attack Akari, Shiro started incorporating quick footwork, small but critical shifts in position as he threw attacks based less around speed and more about unexpected angles and nuanced variations. Akari countered by defending with efficiency, exploiting the lack of same in her father’s approach until he backed away.

“Adequate, Daughter.”

Shiro continued to spar with his daughter until he finally nodded with satisfaction.

"In a very short time, you have made progress in tempering your aggression, responding to unusual attacks and utilising your physicality. I see that you have been diligent, Daughter, and I am curious about your recent sparring partner."

Shiro turned to Jason.

“Are you stronger than my daughter, Mr Asano?”

“When your daughter came to visit my family, the flaws in her mindset were obvious. Too reckless, the under-use of her superhuman physicality. A lack of experience against people using anything other than clean, efficient fighting styles. The technique you drilled into her over the years was carrying her, which had allowed her to avoid her shortcomings. You might say that she was an excellent sword being poorly wielded. Fortunately, my own approach was very suitable for exploiting those flaws. Once I started hammering on them,

she adapted and my early victories became a cavalcade of defeats. Akari is far more formidable than I am."

"You use her first name?"

"Impolitic, I know, but when everyone is named Asano, a logistic necessity."

Shiro turned back to Akari.

"And you, Daughter, how would you assess Mr Asano's ability as a swordsman?"

"You and I live our lives around the sword, Father," Akari said. "Jason does not. He accepts that he will never be a sword master the equal of you and I and embraces the limitation. He trains his swordsmanship for practical purposes rather than as a way of life, and his practical purposes are not to be found in an empty dojo."

"Meaning?" Shiro asked.

"If you ever fight him for real, Father, do it where you can see him."

Shiro let out a chortle, taking the training sword from Akari and holding it in Jason's direction. Jason stood, bowed and stepped onto the tatami mats, claiming the sword.

"Tell me, Mr Asano," he said. "Is my daughter saving you face or are you truly more at home in a more real-world environment?"

"Definitely saving face," Jason said. "I'm quite rubbish."

"He also lies," Akari said. "He always keeps a trick in reserve and fights without honour."

"Yep," Jason agreed merrily. "Honour was invented so that people who own swords could get people who own sticks to fight without cheating. I'm very pro-cheating."

"Do not bother trying to unbalance my father with words, Jason," Akari said. "His will is as sharp as his blade."

"He's holding a blunt training sword," Jason said. "Also, how do you know I'm not just stalling for time while Farrah uses earth magic to dig a tunnel under us and draw a ritual circle on the underside of the floor?"

"What?" Shiro asked as Jason let out a chuckle.

"Mr Asano, you seem like a different person to the one who arrived at my home yesterday."

"I'm in favour of letting people know what they're going to get with me, Patriarch, and letting them take it or leave it. However, I wanted to demonstrate the high regard in which I hold your clan and make my arrival as respectful as I was able."

"I see. You hold my clan in high regard?"

"While you've had your daughter observing me, I've done my homework on you, in turn. Your clan has spared nothing in dedicating their time, resources and people to

combat the troubles the world faces now. I have seen Akari working with the Network in Australia. She fights with dedication, and not for pride or reputation but to help people as best she can. She's a credit to herself, your clan and to you, her father."

"Your sharpest blade truly is the one in your mouth, Mr Asano. Let's see how you do with the one in your hand."

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Shiro and Jason walked through the grounds of the Asano compound, Jason still rather woozy.

"I apologise for striking you so many times in the head, Mr Asano."

"No worries," Jason said. "The tingle of those training swords gives you a bit of a buzz, once you get used to them. You know, you're a lot more relaxed than I was expecting. Akari took weeks to loosen up even a little."

"As you have placed effort into accommodating our sensibilities, I try to accommodate yours, in turn. I was unsure what to expect, to be honest. Your media appearances, reports from the network, what my daughter told me and the footage I have seen of you in battle all paint pictures that don't quite line up. I was hoping that, in person, I might find the connective tissue."

"Sometimes I'm not sure how it all comes together either," Jason admitted. "In the other world, I resolved to remake myself, only to come home and find myself falling into old patterns. Before the current crisis, I went walkabout, to try and settle myself.

"Walkabout?"

"A solitary journey, usually a rite of passage into manhood. I'm still pretty much a man-child so I've tried it a few times, now. It never seems to take quite right, but it's stopped me from cracking so far."

"You are new to magic, yet in just a few years have seen more than most," Shiro said. "It is easy to forget that, given that your name has become so synonymous with magic."

"Our name," Jason corrected.

"Just so."

Jason looked around at the western-style home.

"I was surprised to find your home is built in the western style. By one of the most famous architects in the world, no less."

"Frank Lloyd Wright spent several years in Japan, in the early twenties," Shiro explained. "Less well-known than his role as an architect, he was also a rather prolific dealer in Japanese art. A number of his designs remain here, although ours is the only

extant residential building. My mother assisted him with some trouble he was having with the Cabal, who were much less reclusive a century ago.”

“The Cabal?”

“I’ll spare you the details for the sake of dignity. Suffice to say it involved a kitsune and a significant quantity of lard.”

“Kitsune are real?”

“Oh, yes. Have you had many dealings with the Cabal?”

“No,” Jason said. “My friend, Craig, is a vampire, but that’s about it.”

“They are a strange and eclectic group, taken as a whole. My understanding is they were the magical factions of ancient times, only coming together in the face of external threats. Their internal politics are fractious and uneasy but they are the object of romance and legend. I admit that they have always fascinated me.”

“It’s time our discussion turned to my reason for coming to Japan,” Jason said. “I take it that Akari has appraised you of everything.”

“Yes. You have surprisingly won my daughter over, Mr Asano.”

“Alright, this is getting silly,” Jason said. “Almost everyone here is an Asano. Although I realise it denotes a level of intimacy, is there any chance I can convince you to take a cue from my culture?”

“First names? I suppose we can be considered family, of a kind. I propose that you and I take that step and see how others react.”

“That works for me. Shiro.”

“Then let us return to the topic at hand, Jason. The truth is, our intention was always to bring you here, to settle an old debt to the Tiwari clan. We had no idea that the stakes would turn out to be so high. You truly believe that the world is in peril?”

“I’ve seen a being with power beyond the gods trying to strip an entire planet for parts. I fought him, hand to hand.”

“How did that go?”

“Very badly. All my attacks bounced off and he easily killed me.”

“Killed you?”

“I’ve died three times, so far. That was number two.”

“That’s an extraordinary claim.”

“Extraordinary claims and fields of death are my life, now. Even though it wasn’t so long ago, and didn’t last so long, I miss the life of light-hearted adventure and quips. I want to see this world safe and go back to exploring the other one.”

“You really think you can go back?”



“At this point, it’s inevitable, assuming someone doesn’t kill me in a way that sticks. But first, I need that magic door the Tiwari have been looking after.”

“Arrangements are being finalised as we speak,” Shiro said. “I will take you to meet them after lunch. In the meantime, I would like to discuss what happens after the grid comes back online.”

“We’re not sure exactly what will happen,” Jason said. “What we do know is that certain elements that make up the fundamental building blocks of our world will be rendered physical. This should be something that only the Tiwari door can accomplish, but our world has gone rather awry.”

“What exactly is the danger?”

“There will be objects that manifest in affected areas. It’s a component of the dimensional makeup of our world, affecting the dimensional membrane that separates our physical reality from the astral.”

“I confess that I am not well versed on these concepts,” Shiro said.

“Basically, the dimensional membrane is like the skin of our universe, keeping the insides in and the outsides out. These objects I’m talking about also make up the link between this reality and the other one to which we are connected. That link had been stable for billions of years before someone came along and interfered with it. Now, centuries later, it’s reached the point of continuous dimensional spaces and monster waves.”

“And these objects represent some kind of new threat?”

“Not exactly. The objects represent a source of unparalleled power. They’re like a diamond spirit coin combined with a category five monster core, in a form that can be used at need and the rest kept for later.”

Jason had an increased understanding of the astral magic involved since he had been studying with Dawn’s assistance. His knowledge was still shallow but was quickly accelerating.

“That kind of power would be world-changing,” Shiro said. “It would let us move past the category three threshold we’ve been stuck behind.”

“Yep, and they’re going to start popping up in the middle of these events that we don’t yet understand. Every faction will be scrambling for them, even though every one they take will make the world a little less stable.”

“How many of these objects are out there waiting to be exposed?”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “Millions. Billions, maybe. But that will just give people an excuse to take them and say it doesn’t matter because so many are left.”

“The Network won’t be any different,” Shiro said. “They will scramble after them like the other factions, if only to avoid being overtaken.”

“I agree. Unfortunately, I am not in a position to criticise – not that it’s ever stopped me before. I also need to collect them, to realign the link between worlds. My understanding is that the door can be used to accelerate the process, meaning I need to take it off the board before the other factions become aware of that fact.”

“Yet, you trust me with this information.”

“Honour may not be for me, but it is for Akari. I’m betting it is for the man who raised her, as well.”

“The temptation you describe is great,” Shiro said. “I am not sure how well my honour will hold up.”

## Chapter 375

### Honour

“Where are our guests now?” Noriko asked. She was the strongest member of the Asano clan and the patriarch’s mother. Noriko and Shiro were in a room with the rest of the clan leadership, eight elders kneeling around a low table.

“Lunch is being prepared, hosted by my daughters,” Shiro said. “Jason is taking a call from the Network.”

“We’re monitoring it?” Noriko asked.

“We are,” Shiro said, “although that does not make me comfortable. We are hosts.”

“You will need to swallow much more than that before we are done,” Noriko said.

“Akari told us the basics of what is to come, but if the power on offer is as formidable as what Jason described to you, then we have no choice but to pursue it.”

“Akari will not like going against him.”

“If this far-flung relative speaks the truth at all,” one of the elders said. “It could be some elaborate ruse at our expense.”

“I’m not sure that’s a risk we can afford to take,” said another. “If the power is truly as Shiro has described, we cannot afford to step back from it.”

“Exactly,” Noriko said. “Not only must we fully pursue the opportunities that will be available to all, but we must seize the one that only we have a chance at. It will allow us to not just keep up with those standing at the peak but potentially raise our entire clan to stand at the absolute pinnacle.”

“You don’t just wish to go after the magic that is coming,” Shiro realised. “You are suggesting that we seize the object that Jason has come for from the Tiwari?”

“Yes,” Noriko said.

Shiro frowned unhappily.

“You wish to repay a debt with betrayal?” he asked. “This, on top of betraying those we entertain as hosts.”

“To do any less would be a betrayal of our own people,” Noriko said. “There is no honour in weakness and in the chaos to come, only the strongest shall rise. The rest will be lucky to survive and I refuse to abandon the fate of the clan to luck.”

“What about Network repercussion?” an elder asked.

“You think the Network will stand by Jason and his intentions when they see the EOA and the Cabal grabbing the power to push themselves to category four?” Noriko asked. “As much power and knowledge as he apparently represents, he is not worth giving up

category four power for. Jason will either be forced to accept the Network's intentions or stand aside."

"He will not stand for it," Shiro said. "I can be certain of that much from Akari. She will react poorly to this."

"You are her father and will take her in hand," Noriko said. "One of your roles as her parents is to guide her through the hard but necessary choices."

"I guided her onto a path of honour. Turning her from it is not so simple as you make out."

"Yes, it is," Noriko said. "Do not confuse your own reluctance for difficulty. Mei and Akari are obedient girls."

"How will Asano react?" an elder asked. "We have all read Akari's reports from Australia. It does not seem out of character for Jason to do something rash."

"Then he will reap the consequences," Noriko said. "He will be cautious while he has family here."

"Hostages?" Shiro asked. "Putting aside honour is one thing, but do you intend to burn our name in effigy?"

"One of my roles as your parent is to guide you through the hard but necessary choices, Shiro. This is not a time for hesitation or half-measures. The world is changing and we must be ruthless if we do not wish to be cast aside by those with the will to rise to the top."

"Are we not being pre-emptive?" Shiro argued. "All we have is one conversation with Jason to go on. He could be exaggerating or blowing things out of proportion."

"Agreed," an elder said. "We should learn more before acting."

"Those are the words that will doom our clan!" Noriko pronounced. "All across the world, people are readying to act with boldness. If we hesitate when faced with an opportunity like this, then we are truly without hope."

Shiro hung his head, seeing that he would not be able to turn events.

"Jason's senses are sharp," he said. "Our preparations must be carefully conducted."

"Do not tell Mei and Akari anything," Noriko said. "So long as they believe we are going along with Jason's intentions, they will be a mask for our own."

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Jason was on a video conference call, Asya standing beside him. There were a half-dozen people on a screen in front of him, including Terrance, Anna and Ketevan from the Sydney branch of the Network. The others were all from the International Committee's offices, each one much higher up in the organisation than Asya.

“You messed up really badly with those comments about sharing the blame, Jason,” Terrance said. “Coming right in front of the announcements about the EOA cutting deals with all those countries, you as good as legitimised them.”

“Yes, because my influence is so all-encompassing that one remark from me can change the fate of twenty countries,” Jason said. “That’s hot nonsense. I may have spoken in anger but I didn’t lie, Terrance. The EOA might have dropped the grid, but Makassar is on the Network and the Cabal.”

“It doesn’t matter who is responsible, Jason,” Anna said. “The important thing right now is undercutting the EOA’s influence and you gave them a boost, instead, right when they needed it most. Because no, you can’t sway the fate of twenty countries alone, but you are a voice that people listen to.”

“Then I’m going to try and give that voice some integrity,” Jason said. “Yes, pushing it all onto the EOA right now would help the Network, but if you keep compromising your principles to meet the needs of the moment, eventually you don’t have any principles left. You wake up one day with blood on your hands, not recognising the person in the mirror.”

“It’s all well and good to talk about ethics,” Anna said, “but we have to deal with the reality right now. And right now, the reality is that this move by the EOA has them gaining massive amounts of ground on the Network and you helped with that.”

“I’m not part of the Network,” Jason said. “I quite specifically didn’t join because I didn’t want to be making a choice between the right thing to do and what I was told to do.”

“That is actually our reason for contacting you,” said one of the International Committee members. It was a stern-looking woman, the first member of the IC to speak since the initial introductions.

“The agreement you reached with the Sydney branch has been deemed to be no longer feasible,” she explained. “The time has come for you to truly come under the Network’s umbrella. To become a member with all attendant responsibilities and privileges.”

“You know that isn’t happening,” Jason said.

“Either way, our agreement with you is annulled, as of now,” the IC member stated.

“Fine,” Jason said and ended the call without further discussion. Then his face contorted in anger.

“Jason?” Asya asked, having remained silent through the process.

“They know,” Jason said. “I’m not sure how, but they know what’s up for grabs once the grid comes back up. They know I won’t stand for it so they’re cutting ties now. The next

step will be to undermine my influence. They're going to start portraying me as a fringe, rogue element. Probably some kind of extremist."

"You can't be sure of that."

"I am. I understand that this puts you in an awkward position."

"You know I wasn't the one to tell them, right?" Asya asked, uncertainty and anxiousness on her face.

He stepped forward, catching her in an embrace.

"Of course I know that," he said, comforting her with a firm but delicate hug, their bodies fitting into one another. "I told you that I trust people over the organisations they belong to. This is why. I trust you."

"So, what now?"

"Now it's time for you and the others to go," Jason said. "Things are about to get very ugly."

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Akari and Mei approached the rooms where Jason and his companions had been staying and Jason let her in.

"Where are the others?" Akari asked on finding only Jason inside.

"They decided to go play tourist while I take care of business," Jason explained. "Any danger that finds them with Farrah there will soon wish it hadn't."

"Security didn't notify us of their leaving the premises," Mei said.

"They went with my shadow friend, Shade," Jason said. "He's very stealthy. He could be right there in the room with you and you wouldn't even know."

Akari narrowed her eyes at Jason.

"Jason, what are you doing?"

"If it's any consolation, later," Jason said, "Your father was heavily against it."

Akari frowned, confusion and worry passing across her face.

"It hardly takes two of us, now that you are the only one travelling to the Tiwari clan," Akari said. "Mei, you escort Mr Asano while I inform Father of the change."

Mei looked from Jason to Akari with concern, having no idea what was causing the tension between them.

"Very well," she said.

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"Father, he knows," Akari said, striding into the patriarch's study without knocking or preamble. Shiro was leaning against the desk, wiping a cloth carefully down the length of an unsheathed sword.

"Who knows what?" Shiro asked, not looking up from his task.

"Jason knows what you are going to do."

Shiro slowly raised his head to look at his daughter.

"And what makes you think I'm going to do anything?"

"He sent all his people away in secret and made some thinly-veiled implications."

"What did he say?"

"He made the point of saying that his familiar can be in a room and you wouldn't even know it was there."

Shiro let out a laugh.

"He sent you on a fishing expedition, Daughter. His task is an important one and he is being appropriately cautious. He's doing the right thing. Return to your task."

"Are you sure, father?"

"Quite certain, Akari. Attend your duties."

She gave a slight bow, then left again. Shiro put down the Blade walked over to the door and closed it, before pulling out his phone to call Noriko.

"Yes?" Noriko answered brusquely.

"Asano knows."

"How certain are you?"

"He most likely had his familiar watching our meeting."

"That shouldn't be possible," Noriko said. "We have embedded protections in place."

"It occurs to me that Jason's companion, Farrah Hurin, is the foremost expert in array magic on the planet. Are you willing to bet that she couldn't have circumvented our magical defences?"

"Do you know if he's warned the Tiwari?"

"I do not."

There was a period of silence as Noriko processed the new information.

"It's not too late to turn back to the honourable path," Shiro said. "Choosing the path of power makes sense when there is power to be had, but if not, why throw away our honour for nothing."

"The fact that this is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss has not changed," Noriko said. "It will just cost us a little more blood."

"You want to move forward, whatever the cost? Whatever the risk?"

"The cost of not seizing this chance is worth any risk."

"I disagree," Shiro said. "I'm putting a stop to this before it begins. It's not too late to do nothing."

"You'll do no such thing," Noriko hissed.

"I have always valued your guidance, Mother, but I am the patriarch of this clan, not you."

"If the puppet cuts its own strings, Shiro, it falls down, helpless. Do as you're told."

"You are that unwilling to compromise?" Shiro asked, voice heavy with resignation.

"My will is unbending, son. This is not news to you. Your choices are either to work for the betterment of the clan or throw it into chaos for some Australian you met yesterday."

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Mei was driving a black town car into Kobe. Shiro and Akari sat together in the back, with Jason across from them.

"You look conflicted, Shiro," Jason said.

"Do I?" Shiro asked. "Is that why you sent my daughter to see me?"

"Yes. I think the man who raised Akari will want to be able to look her in the eye tomorrow. There is still a window to stop this before it starts."

Akari watched the two men warily but did not interrupt, despite her burning curiosity.

"I can't stop this, Jason," Shiro said.

"That is unfortunate."

Shiro sighed, turning to look at his daughter. Jason said nothing, sitting casually.

"I can speak for most of the clan," Shiro said with the weariness of a tired old man.

"Most of our oldest and strongest warriors will remain loyal to my mother, however, and I'm sure you know that with essence users it is a power game, not a numbers one."

"The tyranny of rank," Jason said. "I'm familiar with the concept."

"So those are my options," Shiro said. "Keep the clan together, throw away our honour and who knows how many lives of an ally clan to whom we are in debt, or split the clan. Tiwari blood will be spilled either way, and our clan could very easily meet its end."

"Father, what are you talking about?" Akari asked.

"Your grandmother wants to take the magic door by force," Jason explained. "She will not be dissuaded, despite your father's considerable attempts to persuade her to maintain the clan's honour."

"Father, is that true?"

"I'm sorry, Akari."

"It won't even do any good," Jason said. "According to the Tiwari, I'm the only one who can use the door."

"You did contact them, then?" Shiro asked.



“Yes,” Jason said. “Their patriarch was hard to convince that you would throw away your honour, Shiro.”

“Why can only you use it?” Shiro asked. “The prophecy about a man who walks between worlds?”

“After your meeting,” Jason said, “I spoke at length with the Tiwari patriarch through an intermediary. The prophecy is a poetic way of describing a very real magical restriction.”

“Was it left here for you?” Akari asked.

“Partly, I suspect,” Jason said. “I imagine the first choice was that the Network founder would return for it, using the restriction as a security system. Another outworlder being sent here was probably a less-than-reliable backup plan.”

“So, how do you see this going?” Shiro asked. “My mother will not be inclined to accept the Tiwari’s claim. Even if she does, that just means she’ll try and capture you as well, Jason.”

“It will take a lot to make her back down,” Jason said. “I’m hoping that the combination of the Tiwari being ready, the fact that she can’t even use the door and the threat of a schism in the clan will be enough to get her to back down. I’ve convinced the Tiwari to let your clan leave in peace if they are willing to do so. The friendship between your clans is dead either way, however.”

“You think I’ll turn on my mother and start a civil war inside my clan?”

“I’m hoping that you’ll save your clan’s soul, Shiro, as well as its people. Once the fighting starts I won’t stop until the job is done.”

“My daughter told me not to fight you unless I can see you,” Shiro said.

“You won’t see me,” Jason said. “You’ll see your clan staggering out of the dark, dead on their feet.”

“You’re very confident.”

“Yes. I’m either right to be or I’m not. Do you really want to find out, Patriarch?”

Shiro looked into Jason’s cold, silver eyes. He had never sensed so much as an echo of Jason’s aura but suddenly he felt something his senses could barely touch, like an object just beyond the reach of his fingers. It was deep, like a dark abyss, with the promise of power and danger.

“Are you still human, Jason?”

“No,” Jason said. “Not anymore.”

## Chapter 376

### They Get to See What I'm Like

The Tiwari clan seat was located in Arima Onsen Town, nestled in beautiful nature amongst thickly forested hills. The car taking Jason to meet the clan made its way north toward Kobe's Kita-ku ward also contained the Asano clan patriarch, Shiro, and his two daughters. The elder, Akari, was sitting next to her father, unsettled at the discussion between Shiro and Jason. The younger sister, Mei, was driving the town car, with Shiro and Akari facing Jason in the back.

"So, what exactly was the plan?" Jason asked.

"Use stealth specialists to follow us to where the Tiwari clan is hiding the door," Shiro said. "Two of them, each category three."

"It seems that either your mother doesn't trust you or someone else is trying to horn in," Jason said. "Or both. There are currently four silver-rankers following us. That I've noticed, at least."

"I can't sense them," Shiro said. "Are you sure?"

"They are all in cars," Jason said. "It could be that a bunch of silver-rankers all wanted to visit the same hot spring town at the same time and are driving there individually," Jason said. "Shade, go take a look. If they are here for us, go with plan C. Variant three, please."

"Are you sure you want to make that level of commotion?" Shade asked.

"If the Network wants to tear up our arrangement, they get to see what I'm like operating without shackles."

"Not having access to military supplies will make replenishing supplies for plan C harder."

"No, it'll just make it less legal," Jason said. "It won't be hard."

"Very well," Shade said.

"What's plan C?" Akari asked.

"Plan C is all about Shade," Jason said. "He can turn intangible, store objects in his own dimensional space and is very, very hard to detect. We loaded Shade up with a bunch of useful items and came up with a series of plans where Shade plants objects near targets."

"Like cameras?" Akari asked. "That would be useful. Is that what the C stands for?"

"No," Jason said, pulling out a palm-sized black box with a small antenna. It had a switch and a button under a plastic flip cover, as well as a green indicator light.

"Everything is in place," Shade said.

"That was quick," Shiro said.

"I was already moving when the discussion began," Shade said.

"Plan C does not stand for plan camera," Jason said, flipping the switch on the device, and causing the light to go from green to red. "It stands for C4. Give me the timing, Shade."

He lifted the cover over the button.

"Now," Shade said.

Jason pressed the button and a trio of simultaneous explosions rang out behind them.

Shiro and Akari both craned their necks to look out the back.

"I'd make sure we get out of the area before the authorities get involved," Jason told Mei, in the driver's seat. "It'll be quite the commotion."

"Commotion?" Shiro said, looking aghast at Jason. "Do you know what you've done?"

"Don't worry," Jason said with a friendly smile. "I made sure they were shaped charges, so the silver-rank shrapnel I made will have passed right up through the cars Shade attached the charges to the bottom of. It'll hit anyone inside like a, well, bomb, while not impacting nearby civilians. Too much. Any shrapnel that makes it above a certain height will break down into metal powder, too light to fall down and hurt anyone."

"Silver-rank shrapnel?"

"Yes, my artifice abilities are very basic, but investing some caltrops with a few simple properties is within my capabilities."

"How can you set off bombs in Japan?" Shiro asked.

Jason looked Shiro square in the eye, the friendly, casual expression vanishing into an icy glare.

"I need something to save the world and you want to take it for your own power? The Network wants to drop me to scabble over magical scraps, disregarding their very purpose? I can handle that kind of greed but this is what handling it looks like. The gloves are off, Shiro. I don't want to kill anyone but if saving this world from people like you means wading through a river of their blood, I will. Speaking of which, any lethal casualties, Shade?"

"No. The silver-rankers were each travelling alone, presumably to avoid low-rankers being detected. The blast itself had minimal impact on them but the magical shrapnel was much more effective. Their lives are not endangered but their ability to continue is certainly impacted and they are no longer following."

"Good," Jason said. "Collateral?"

"I selected a moment to avoid collateral damage, although there was some cosmetic damage to surrounding vehicles."

"The concussive redistribution magic on the container for the shaped charge directed the sound and force up," Jason explained. "Even more focused than a regular-shaped charge. More power where you want it and less collateral damage. A little simple magic goes a long way when you use it right."

"There was also some minimal property damage. Nearby civilians are unsettled, with a few minor injuries from low-speed traffic collisions in the ensuing chaos. One elderly man was having heart problems so I fed him a potion. Civic authorities have begun to arrive."

"Thank you, Shade," Jason said. "Excellent work, as always."

As their car left the area quickly, Akari and Shiro continued to look at Jason with horror, while his hard expression returned to the friendly one from before, as if nothing had happened. He pulled out a sandwich, took a bite, and then looked at them apologetically.

"Sorry, did you want one?" he asked with his mouth full. "I have more. Salad, ham. One with three different kinds of salami."

They both shook their heads. Jason took another bite and then looked at Shiro.

"So what now?" Jason asked. "What's your mother's contingency for her scouts getting taken out?"

"Contingency?" Shiro asked. "This is not our area of expertise. We're monster-hunters, not special-forces soldiers. If the scalpel doesn't work, my mother will use the hammer. If she can't follow us to where the Tiwari are storing the door, she will likely use our silver-rank forces, most of which are loyal to her, to attack the Tiwari directly, capture the patriarch and have him reveal the location."

Jason nodded.

"Call your mother and give me the phone."

"You want me to call her?"

"If we have any chance of ending this peacefully, we need to talk without being able to stab each other."

Shiro nodded.

"She wouldn't hesitate to try and solve you out of the equation, given the chance."

He dialled and handed Jason the phone.

"You shouldn't be calling me," Noriko's voice came through by way of a greeting.

"I shouldn't be blowing up cars on the streets of Kobe, either, yet here we are."

"Jason Asano," she hissed. "You aren't one of us. You don't deserve that name."

"I have zero interest in joining your clan, Noriko. The question is whether you are going to destroy that clan."

"I'm doing this for the clan. My son is weak, which is how you managed to turn him against me."

"Shiro didn't turn against you, Noriko. He wants to save the soul of your clan. If you attack the Tiwari, even if you win, the Asano clan will never be what they were."

"I'm a century older than you, boy, and you seek to lecture me on the soul of my clan?"

"You do have a wealth of experience over me," Jason acknowledged. "If I can see that your clan teeters on a precipice, then surely you can too. If you attack the Tiwari, then you create a schism in your clan at the same moment you create a dangerous enemy, and for what? A magic door you can't use."

"So you say."

"The Tiwari have had this object for centuries," Jason said. "You think they haven't tried to access its power? If they had succeeded, they would be ruling the world with their gold-rankers, not calling in favours to have your clan bring me to Japan."

"Even if the Tiwari do not lie and the item is locked," Noriko said, "we will find a way."

"Will you?" Jason asked. "After the infighting and the retaliation from the Tiwari clan? After I tell the world about the door and the fact that you have it? How many category-five dimensional magic experts do you have, Noriko?"

"We will do what we must."

"And is what you must do push forward, past every sign you should stop? Your plan was already sketchy. Now your scouts are gone, your clan's support has evaporated and the Tiwari know you're coming."

"My clan must seize this opportunity, whatever the cost."

"This isn't the opportunity, Noriko. The opportunity is in stepping back and keeping your clan whole. You already know more about what's coming than almost any faction on earth. Take the time to prepare and get a head start when the time comes to start racing after resources, with the full strength of your clan. Shiro might be against attacking and stealing from the Tiwari, but he won't stand by while everyone else grabs for power. You aren't choosing between having the door or not, Noriko. You're choosing between facing what's to come with a full and ready clan, and scrabbling after leftovers with your handful of silver-rankers while dodging Tiwari vengeance."

"I thought you didn't want people going after these objects of power."

"I don't," Jason said. "I'm not stupid enough to think I can stop them, though. Your clan included. I have also secured the assurance that the Tiwari will not seek retribution so long as you do not attack them."

"I have only your word on these things."

"You have little more than my word on almost any of it," Jason said. "The power you seek, my word on it. The danger it poses, my word again. You chose boldness because you didn't have time to verify and now you're mired in a bog of my design. Will you be sucked under and drown if you move ahead or am I lying and solid ground awaits you?"

"You like to hear yourself talk."

"Yes. Especially when I'm right. Go home and take all the advantages or fight and give them up. I'll be waiting for your decision with the Tiwari clan."

Jason hung up the phone and handed it back to Shiro, before turning to Akari.

"I never wanted to back your grandmother into a corner. All I wanted to do was show her that backing off isn't the weak, short-sighted move but the smart, forward-thinking one."

He then turned to Shiro.

"This is where we part. Go home. I hope this is the last time I have to deal with your clan, Shiro, because next time there will likely be blood. I'm sorry it ended like this, Akari." A Shade body emerged from Jason's shadow and Jason vanished into it.

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Jason rode in a Shade car toward the Tiwari clan seat, which was the palatial Arima Grand Resort.

"How did I do?" Jason asked.

"You were somewhat unfocused," Shade critiqued. "Your strengths are playing to emotion and controlling pace, which lends itself to a more rambling style of argumentation. Presenting the facts to demonstrate one choice is objectively better is not your strength. That being said, it was an adequate performance."

"We'll only know how adequate it was once the decision is made," Jason said. "Is she taking precautions in case you're watching?"

"None that I have noticed."

"I might take a peek, then."

Jason closed his eyes and saw through Shade's eyes.

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Noriko was standing beside a parked van, arguing with the silver-rank clan elders, their strongest combatants. The general consensus was to withdraw, while she tried to convince them to push on.

"It is probably all bluff," she said.

"Perhaps," an elder said. "I am unwilling to risk the clan on 'perhaps.' Unless everything goes perfectly, the boy is lying and this magic door gives us vast power, this act will split the clan and throw away our face forever."

"Agreed," another said. "We can struggle for power with everyone else without destroying who and what we are in the process. We even have a lead on everyone else. We should be dedicating ourselves to making the most of it."

The arguing continued but ultimately the choice was made to abort the attack.

"I will contact Shiro and that obnoxious brat," Noriko said.

"Oh, don't bother with me," Jason's voice said as a dark figure with silver eyes stepped out of the dark.

"You can watch us through your shadow beings," Noriko said.

"Yes. Your strategic situation was rather untenable, should you have decided to go through with the attack. I am not here to crow, however. My Asano family and your Asano clan henceforth have no connections, Noriko."

"If we meet again, it will be as enemies."

"I hope that day never comes," Jason said. "You should hope for it more."

## Chapter 377

### Fanboy

The Arima Grand Resort was a palace hidden in a forest, the most opulent of the many accommodations in Arima Onsen Town. With magic now out in the open, Jason didn't have to go to the bother of hiding it as he approached the resort, Shade transforming from car to a cloud of shadow right outside the lobby, from which Jason strode as the dark miasma was sucked into his shadow.

Ignoring the resulting stares, Jason made his way across an atrium larger than most homes, spotting someone hurrying to intercept him. It was a young man of maybe twenty, with an earnest, nervous aura. It showed plainly in the anxiety on his face, but his aura was solidly controlled. If Jason senses weren't so much more powerful than the freshly bronze-rank young man, he wouldn't have been able to read his emotions at all. Most interestingly, his aura contained no trace of monster cores.

"Mr Asano," the young man greeted with a respectful bow. "My name is Tiwari Itsuki."

Jason returned the bow, a smile playing on his lips. The young man's aura shuddered with anxiety.

"I apologise for being the one to meet you but preparations are being made should events go unfortunately. Would you please follow me?"

"Of course," Jason said, following the young man who did a mostly adequate job of hiding his nervous energy. "I wouldn't be too worried, Mr Tiwari. I'm confident that the Asano clan has reconsidered their path going forward."

"Truly?" Itsuki asked as he led Jason across a lobby full of people staring at them.

"I just came from a chat with Asano Noriko. It could have been a bluff but I believe the Asano clan will be packing up and going home without paying you that visit."

"I knew you would do something," Itsuki said.

"Don't go crediting me too much."

Itsuki guided Jason out of the lobby and into the internal halls.

"There's no reason to be modest, Mr Asano. I've been following your exploits through the news, obviously, and all the network reports I could find. I actually asked my father if I could be the one to meet you. I'm taking you to the family's private residence at the rear of the resort grounds."

"I'll have to disagree about modesty," Jason said. "Always either be modest or wildly self-aggrandising. Avoid anything in between, for there lies mediocrity."

"That's... an unusual perspective."



"If it comes up," Jason said, "tell them to put that on my tombstone."

"Uh..."

"I'm not what you expected?"

"Not quite. I'd heard some things from Asano Akari, but they seemed a little outlandish. I'd thought she was joking."

"You know Akari?"

"I haven't seen her in person since she left. I suppose I won't be able to at all, now."

"It might be a bit awkward, yes," Jason said, sensing the sadness suddenly suffusing the young man.

"I see you didn't use cores to reach bronze-rank," Jason said, changing the subject.

"Sorry, category two."

"We have been using the otherworld terminology since we started training our people with the Hurin techniques."

"The Hurin techniques? They named them after Farrah?"

"Yes, Mr Asano. I had long considered myself unlucky, being unable to absorb essences until I was nineteen. The timing was perfect for the new techniques, however, and I was sent to Sydney with the first international representatives for training. I was in the same training group as Taika Williams."

"You know Taika? Have you and I met before?"

"I attended some lectures you gave on aura control at the Sydney branch but this is our first time actually meeting."

"Sorry I didn't recognise you. I've been rude."

"There were over a hundred people in attendance and I was just a fresh iron-ranker. There is no need to apologise."

"I did mostly leave training people to Farrah. I'm a bit rambling and unfocused to be a good instructor, which worked out better for you, I think, getting Farrah instead. I taught some people aura control in the other world for a while and they paired me with someone to keep me on track. That turned out to be a good idea."

"Miss Asano told me that you are difficult to keep on any track you don't want to be on, Mr Asano."

Jason laughed.

"That sounds about what Akari's assessment would be. That's why they had my friend Humphrey riding herd on me."

Jason's face took on a sad, reminiscing smile.

"The way things are going, here," he said, "I can't wait to go home."

“To Australia?”

“No.”

Itsuki looked at the expression on Jason’s face and didn’t probe further. They left the main resort building through a side door and Itsuki took the driver’s seat of a waiting golf cart. The resort was a sprawling complex made up of multiple huge buildings set into the forested surrounds, rising up the side of a large hill.

“You must have been quite active to reach bronze-rank in what? Five months?” Jason asked.

“I’ve done my duty as a member of the Network as best I can,” Itsuki said.

Five months was basically unheard of, even in the other world. Jason knew that ranking up in five months was only possible with a vast number of monsters. Even then, the boy would need an impressive level of talent and, more importantly, dedication. Only the kind of consistent conflict Jason himself faced living in an astral space could grant that kind of advancement, which meant the boy had to be all but living in proto spaces.

That kind of drive suggested an implacability rather at odds with the nervous young man driving the golf cart. Either he had unexpected depths or the off-kilter predilections of a serial-killer, redirected into monster hunting. Either way, he was someone worth paying attention to.

“If you don’t mind,” Jason said, “would you be willing to share your essence combination?”

Itsuki’s aura shuddered and his nervousness was made plain on his face.

“It’s alright to say no,” Jason chuckled.

“No, it’s just a little embarrassing.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that,” Jason said. “I have a friend, once of the most skilled essence users I ever met. Someone who taught me, in fact. He has a story about a lesson he learned getting showed up by a man with the duck essence.”

“It’s not like that,” Itsuki said. “It’s just... my essences are dark, blood and omen, with a doom confluence.”

“Oh,” Jason said. “You really have been following my exploits, haven’t you?”

Itsuki’s face went red.

“I’ve never met a fan, before. Do you have any of my merch? The proceeds go to charity, which is the only reason I went along with Terrance and his nonsense.”

“Terrance?”

“Never mind. You didn’t get the knockoff stuff from China, did you? I’m sure the Network there is behind it, not that they’ll admit it.”

“Mr Asano, please.”

Jason laughed, slapping Itsuki on the shoulder.

“I’m just messing with you, bloke. Are you an affliction specialist?”

“Yes.”

“Nice. We should find some time to swap notes, maybe clear out a proto-space together.”

“Really?”

“If events don’t overtake us, sure. No promises, though. Events overtake me quite a lot. Just earlier I was setting off a bunch of car bombs.”

“That was you?”

“Yep. Only had to use three, because two of them were in the same car. They definitely weren’t just some couple going on holiday right, Shade?”

“I am quite certain of their sinister intentions,” Shade said. “Unfortunately for them, it takes a lot to catch up to you in sinister intentions.”

“Oh!” Itsuki exclaimed, almost driving the cart off the path. “You’re Shade, the shadow familiar.”

“I know,” Shade said. “I am starting to see why people telling you your name all the time is annoying, Mr Asano.”

Jason laughed as Itsuki went pale.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jason told him. “Do you have a familiar? They’re pretty rare on this side.”

“Yes, Mr Asano, I do. My father made sure I had the ritual training to make it possible. I only have the one, though, and it does not communicate. I don’t exactly know what it is.”

“We can take a look later,” Jason said. “See if we can’t figure it out.”

“I apologise, Mr Shade,” Itsuki said. “I’ve watched the ritual of your summoning many times.”

“Because that’s not creepy at all,” Jason said.

The golf cart rode up the hill through the complex that was oddly like a small town, if there was a small town occupied exclusively by billionaires. They arrived at the rear of the complex, which was the highest point on the hill. Compared to a palatial buildings elsewhere, the Tiwari residence was smaller, more modest and had more traditional Japanese influence in the architecture than western. More modest meaning that it was a giant mansion, rather than a hotel for people who thought the Palace of Versailles was an adequate start.

Jason could sense the protections embedded into it. They were not so intricate and formidable as a Network branch office but he would still have to be careful should he attempt to intrude, unnoticed or otherwise. It had not been enough to prevent Shade entering to approach the clan Patriarch, so that Jason could clandestinely warn him of the Asano clan's intentions.

The defences seemed to be in an active state, which probably mean they were burning through spirit coins. As he watched, the defences started spooling down.

"They must have heard the Asano clan isn't coming," Jason said.

"What makes you say that?" Itsuki asked.

"The magical protections are being wound down."

"You can read our magical defences just from looking?"

"The benefits of a grounding in magical theory were explained to me many times," Jason said. "It turned out to be very true. I take it that you were only taught the practical basics of rituals?"

"Yes, Mr Asano."

"Try studying up on the theory. It'll be worth it, I promise."

"I'll do my best," Itsuki said. "There is only so much material I can get my hands on."

They stopped outside the building and went to the doors on foot, where two men were standing guard in black suits. They bowed as Itsuki and Jason approached.

"Lord Itsuki. The defences are being stood down to readiness condition two. Your father wishes you to bring Mr Asano to the patriarch's office."

"Thank you, Ryuhei."

Itsuki was like a different person in front of the doormen. All traces of nervousness gone from his face and his aura was brought under control. If Jason's senses weren't so powerful, he wouldn't have been able to read him at all.

"That is some impressive aura control," Jason said. "You learned Farrah's lessons well."

"And yours, Mr Asano. The compliment is great, coming from you. Miss Hurin once told me that your aura has strength and power enough to be used as a weapon itself."

"I prefer not to," Jason said. "Some weapons are best left in their sheath."

The inside of the Tiwari residence was busy, although the people hurrying about frequently took a look at Jason and Itsuki as they passed by. Jason assessed the building as being deeply modernised, under a façade of old-world dignity. Jason's silver-rank perception picked out surveillance systems and communication signals imperceptible to a normal human, all hidden under traditional Japanese décor. Itsuki led Jason to an elevator,

where a man with an expensive suit and a discrete earbud stopped them. Jason could sense that he was silver-rank.

“Uncle Souta,” Itsuki greeted.

“Itsuki,” the man said, then bowed respectfully to Jason, who reciprocated.

“Mr Asano,” Souta said. “My name is Tiwari Souta. I am afraid that you will need to disable whatever means you are using to obfuscate our security before moving forward. I apologise, but given the circumstances, we are wary of allowing anyone with the name Asano access to our clan leadership.”

“Uncle Souta! Mr Asano was the one who warned us!”

“Decorum, Itsuki,” Souta scolded.

“Apologies, Uncle.”

“It’s perfectly understandable,” Jason said. “Dial it back, please, Shade. In fact, you may as well pop out.”

A Shade body emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“It wouldn’t do to go smuggling people in, so let’s get out in the open, yes? Front and centre, gents.”

Gordon manifested next to Shade, while Jason pointed an arm down the hallway, palm out. Glistening blood seeped through the skin of his palm and then started spraying out in a stream, unsettling Itsuki and Souta. The blood congealed into a robed figure that looked identical to Jason, except for the red-purple colour of its skin.

“Gentlemen, meet Shade, Gordon and Colin. My closest companions.”

Jason and his familiars all lined up together, looking like a blood clone, and a shadow clone and an alien void monster.

“I’m not so sure about this,” Souta said.

“If you accept me, you accept them,” Jason said. “Literally, since they are my familiars. If you don’t accept them, then you might as well tell me where the door is and I’ll make my own way.”

Souta looked over the four of them, lingering on Gordon, who looked like a floating violation of the laws of physics.

“If you had not revealed them, would we have any means of detecting them?”

“No, but your patriarch certainly knew about Shade. I’m pretty certain that Itsuki, here, could have told you about the others, if you didn’t know already. Don’t go crediting me with too much honesty.”

Itsuki had been looking at the familiar’s with distracted amazement, only looking up when his name was called.

Souta looked at Itsuki sternly but Jason could sense the man's mix of exasperation and affection. He tapped his earbud, then nodded.

"Very well. Please come along."

Jason's familiars unmanifested. Shade returned to Jason's shadow, Gordon vanished and Colin was reabsorbed, then Souta, Itsuki and Jason entered the elevator.

"Do you get heavier when Colin is inside you?" Itsuki asked.

"I think so," Jason said. "I didn't used to, when he would just disappear, as much as it seemed like he was entering my body. Now we seem to merge more physically than before. I'm not sure if it's him or me that changed, or a little of both."

The elevator ride was short and they walked down another hall towards a set of double doors.

"Is your father the patriarch?" Jason asked Itsuki.

"No, my uncle is. Father is the youngest brother, Uncle Souta is in the middle and Uncle Denji is the patriarch."

"Your father has two older brothers as well?" Jason asked. "Itsuki, are you trying to steal my identity?"

"What?"

"Mr Tiwari," Jason asked Souta. "Does Itsuki have a poster of me on his wall?"

"I don't," Itsuki said unconvincingly.

"It's the one where I'm on the roof of a building like Batman isn't it? I always thought that one was over the top."

"That one was your idea," Shade said.

"Quiet, you."

They reached the doors where a pair of men in black suits stood guard.

"I love the men in black look your security people have going on," Jason said. "Very intimidating."

The men opened the doors to allow them into a large office where the back wall was made entirely of glass, looking out over the resort as it sprawled down the hillside. Two men were waiting for them, both silver-rankers, bearing no small resemblance to Souta.

"Mr Asano," the patriarch, Denji greeted. He moved forward to shake hands rather than offer a Japanese bow. "It is good to meet you in person, although your shadowy go-between was quite remarkable. And stealthy."

"I have a friend who could recommend ways to keep him out," Jason said. "You'll have to forgive me for asking her not to."

“You speak of Miss Hurin,” Denji said. “My nephew holds you both in high regard. I understand she is also in Japan?”

“She is making sure that my friends and family don’t suffer the undue attention of the Asano clan. Given our shared ancestry, our meeting was rather disappointing.”

“Disappointment is the order of the day,” Denji agreed. “I have just gotten off the phone with Asano Shiro, who I have known since we were boys. It is sad to lose a friend and an ally, but their intentions today are beyond forgiveness.”

“Shiro was against the move from the beginning,” Jason said.

“Oh, I don’t doubt it,” Denji said. “It’s his mother. I do not know how you convinced that woman to back off.”

“I didn’t do anything. She merely came to see the consequences clearly.”

“That seems rather easy, given the woman in question.”

“I was thinking much the same thing. I suspect that she’ll come for me again, once I have the door.”

“That would not surprise me, although perhaps the fear of Network retribution will stay her hand.”

“I doubt it. The Network and I will be increasingly at odds, from now on. Which puts you in something of an awkward position, sorry.”

“Not at all,” Denji said. “Our clan’s first duty is to the Network’s founder and the task left to us, not the Network’s modern incarnation.”

“And that task is protecting the door?”

“Yes,” Denji said. “Until someone that can use it arrives.”

## Chapter 378

### A Very Bad Mistake

Itsuki left Jason with the three elders, the Tiwari clan patriarch and his two younger brothers. The patriarch was Denji, the middle brother Souta and the youngest, Itsuki's father, was Koya. The office of the patriarch was a large room with a desk over to one side and a lounge area off on the other, with armchairs in a semi-circle around a coffee table, looking out through the window wall.

Denji invited Jason to sit and they all took lounge chairs as a security guard in an expensive black suit came in with a tray of tea. Jason nodded his gratitude and took a sip, then murmured something too softly for even silver-rank perception to make out.

"I'm not sure if you are aware of how monumental your arrival is for our clan," Denji said. "Since we learned of your existence and that you met the conditions of our long-held purpose, there has been much discussion within the clan. Not everyone is happy or even accepting of your arrival. You represent the destiny of the clan, which is a concept that not everyone in the clan has comes to terms with."

"Some of your members don't want me to take the door?"

"In practical terms," Denji said, "we are no different from any of the other Network clans. The door remains hidden and untouched, with very few clan members even knowing its location, let alone having seen it. Even so, being keepers of the door gives us a sense of purpose. Many of our members are fearful of what it means should that purpose come to an end. When who and what you are came to light, many sought to discredit you and claim you were not the object of prophecy."

"And you put stock in this prophecy?" Jason asked.

"In honesty, Mr Asano, the prophecy is a simple concept to placate the clan. The elders have passed down the records from the founder, which give a more comprehensive explanation. This is not something shared with the clan at large, which has unfortunately led to duty sometimes drifting in the direction of faith. Some of our members may even intend you harm."

"I learned that as soon as I tasted the tea," Jason said with a smile.

"The tea?"

"I don't know about yours," Jason said, "but mine has rather a lot of poison in it."

"What?" Denji asked, leaping to his feet.

"It's actually not bad," Jason said, taking another sip.

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- You have been afflicted with poison [Serpent Nettle Extract].
  - You have resisted [Serpent Nettle Extract].
  - [Food Poisoning] does not take effect.
  - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
- 

“Serpent nettle extract,” Jason said. “I assume I’m respected enough that it’s a category three poison they used on me.”

The faces of all three Tiwari elders were darkened with rage.

“Serpent nettle extract is a poison our alchemists harvest from plants in some of the more common proto-space environments in this area,” Souta said. “You might call it a Tiwari clan specialty. This definitely came from within the clan.”

“I think that’s jumping to conclusions,” Jason said. “Someone could easily obtain some and use it to sow discontent. That’s what I’d do.”

He took another sip.

“Why are you still drinking it?” an aghast Koya asked Jason. “Serpent nettle extract is the most potent venom we’ve ever encountered!”

“Actually,” Jason said setting the cup down with distaste, “the flavour profile starts out well but that aftertaste leaves something to be desired. If there’s any poison in yours, I’d give it a miss. I don’t want to be rude, being your guest, but is there any chance of a palate cleanser?”

Souta stepped forward, took an eyedropper from his pocket and squirted some clear liquid into Jason’s cup. A sickly green mist rose up, letting off an unpleasant stench.

“Yep,” Jason said, holding his nose. “That’s the aftertaste.”

“The smell is unpleasant but harmless,” Souta said. “That was definitely serpent nettle extract.”

Souta squirted liquid into the other cups, but only Jason's evidenced a reaction.

"It was Noguchi," Souta said. "He served the drinks, so he had to know which cup to give Mr Asano."

Souta said no more, striding toward the door.

“Mr Tiwari,” Jason called after him and he stopped.

“I had my friend go after the server as soon as I tried the tea,” Jason continued.

“Please allow him to guide you.”

“Your friend?” Souta asked and one of Shade’s bodies emerged from Souta’s shadow.

"This way, Mr Tiwari," Shade said and started gliding down the corridor. After a wide-eyed glance at Jason, Souta followed. Koya and Denji, in the meantime, were giving their own shadow wary looks.

"I'm beginning to be very glad that I'm not Noriko Asano," Koya said.

"You seem oddly relaxed, given the attempt to murder you," Denji said to Jason.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll tell me if it's anything beyond internal clan politics," Jason said. "I respect anyone with the decency to try and kill me directly, rather than go after my family. I'll try and kill them right back, if it's appropriate, but I won't hold it against them. Noriko Asano was all for going after my family, so she's going to cop it when she inevitably comes after me again."

The two brothers looked at Jason's friendly smile much differently than when he first arrived. They had the expressions of people who suddenly found themselves holding a snake by the tail.

"We are truly sorry, Mr Asano," Koya said. "You gave us a warning when the Asano clan were going to come after us and we repaid you with enmity. I'd like to assure you that this was not the clan leadership."

"That being said, while the clan elders may not be to blame," Denji said, "we are responsible. Such is the nature of leadership."

"I appreciate that," Jason said. "The simple fact is that I'm not interested in what my taking the door means for your clan, as callous as that sounds. Do you know why I need it?"

"According to the clan records," Denji said, "the magic of our world would become imbalanced and require intervention. Someone would appear to make that intervention and he intended it to be himself. He believed that if something happened to him, someone else would appear, however."

"And something did."

"We do not know what, however. There have long been rumours of betrayal by aspects of the Network, but this was the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Network was still a collection of unaffiliated secret societies, without a fragment of the power required to take down the founder."

The office door burst open as Itsuki rushed in.

"Mr Asano!"

"Itsuki!" Koya scolded. "What are you doing, coming into the patriarch's office like that?"

"Uncle Souta said that Mr Asano had been poisoned," Itsuki said.

"I'm quite fine," Jason assured him. "Thank you for your concern."

"Souta told you that?" Koya asked his son.

"He didn't tell me, as such," Itsuki admitted. "I might have just overheard."

"And he didn't sense you listening in?" Jason asked. "Not bad. Patriarch, given the circumstances, I think it might be best to cut through the niceties and go directly to the door right now."

"Of course," Denji said, then shook his head. "After all this time, it's not how this moment was meant to go."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Jason said. "Star Wars fans feel like this every time a new movie comes out."

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Jason's companions emerged from Jason's portal onto one of the Arima Grand Resort's helipads, the one reserved for the Tiwari clan's private use in the middle of a wide lawn. Waiting with Jason were Itsuki, Koya and Denji. Only Farrah didn't come through, as she would need her own portal. While Jason waited out the cooldown on his portal power, he introduced the others to the Tiwari family.

"I cannot express enough our dismay at the attempt on Mr Asano's life," Denji said.

"The what?" Erika asked.

"It was just poison," Jason said.

"Oh, that's fine," Erika said with relief. "I once saw him drink bleach to make a point, and I'm not sure that even counts as poison. I'd have said it was more caustic than poisonous."

"Bleach is corrosive," Emi said. "I'm pretty sure it's poison if you drink it, though."

"Why exactly are people trying to kill you?" Yumi asked.

"They probably met him," Dawn said.

"Rude," Jason said.

"You punched my nose into my brain."

"That again?" Jason asked. "I've died three times so far, and you don't see me complaining."

"Really?" Asya asked. "You kind of bring it up a lot."

"That's because if people realise I just keep coming back, they'll realise there's no point killing me in the first place."

Denji and Koya shared an uncertain look as they witnessed the exchange, while Itsuki had a wide grin on his face. Jason used his portal again and Farrah stepped through.

“Any issues?” Jason asked her.

“I told you over the phone,” Erika said. “Nothing happened”.

“One of the Asano clan came sniffing around,” Farrah contradicted. “Just a bronze-ranker.”

“When was this?” Erika asked.

“I didn’t want to worry you,” Farrah told her. “Don’t worry; he didn’t get any messages back and I was thorough. No one will realise it’s a corpse; they’ll just think someone burned some rubbish.”

“You killed someone?” Erika asked her.

“I’m fair game,” Jason said, then his voice turned cold. “You are not.”

“He has to be decisive when protecting the family,” Yumi approved. “If we show weakness, we’ll be treated as weak.”

Jason introduced Farrah to the Tiwari clan.

“You know, Miss Hurin technically meets the requirements for the prophecy as well,” Itsuki pointed out. “Depending on how important you consider the ‘man’ part of ‘a man who walks between worlds.’ Given that I don’t think they technically walked, it means there is leeway for interpretation.”

“Actually, there is more to the requirements than that,” Denji said. “You have never been to see the door, Itsuki, but you will soon learn.”

“I get to go?”

“You will, in fact, be the last Tiwari to see the door, if things otherwise go as planned.”

“Because that’s the way it always goes,” Jason muttered. “Alright, everyone back off so we can get this show on the road.”

Everyone backed away onto the surrounding lawn and darkness came storming from Jason’s shadow, Shade taking his sleek plane form.

“The door isn’t here?” Farrah asked.

“Yeah, I thought they’d have it in a basement or something,” Jason said.

“The greatest security is secrecy,” Denji explained. “From the beginning, the door has been hidden on an uninhabited island in the Pacific Ocean.”

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Jason and the others descended towards the water in jet suits, hovering over the water as Shade took the form of a large, twin-level motorboat. They settled onto the large upper deck.

“This is rather convenient,” Koya said as the jet suit evaporated around him.

“That was amazing!” Itsuki said. “Will my familiar be able to do things like that?”

"I don't know," Jason said. "Shade's ability to take different transportation forms actually comes from one of my abilities. It was a gift from Shade's dad."

"Your familiar has a father?" Denji asked.

"Yeah, his old man is Death," Jason said.

"What do you mean, Death?" Koya asked.

"You, know, Death," Jason said. "Scythe, robes, that Ingmar Bergman film. No wealth no land, no silver, no gold; nothing satisfies me but your soul. Death."

"As usual," Shade said, "what Jason is describing is only true from a very specific point of view."

"I'm like Obi-Wan Kenobi," Jason said cheerfully. "Let's get this boat moving!"

Soon the boat was roaring over bright, clear water, between towering islets of stone. They passed by small, uninhabited islands covered in lush greenery. Denji directed Shade on where to go as Erika spoke to Jason.

"We had a plane and those jet suits," she said. "Why do we need to go anywhere by boat."

"Look around us, Eri. How can we not go by boat?"

"I thought you were in a hurry."

"I am, Eri. But I also want to have a nice, fun day before I find myself annihilating monster victims animated as walking corpses again. Let me have this one." She pulled him into a hug.

"Of course, little brother."

Jason moved over to the railing, joining Farrah in leaning up against it and looking out.

"This is what adventuring in my world is meant to be," he told her. "Exotic locales and ancient treasure in hidden ruins. Looking at all this tropic beauty, the horrible things we saw just a few days ago seem so far away."

"It's a nice change from the dark days behind us," Farrah agreed, "but I fear there are more to come. For now, though, let us take our joys where we can find them."

"Deal," Jason said, turning to look at Asya and flashing her a grin. She was sitting on a bench that ran along the side of the motorboat's upper deck and he sauntered over to join her, their bodies leaning into one another.

"How glad are you right now that you never joined the Federal Police?" he asked.

"I'm not sure how much the network is for me, either," she said. "I don't like the direction they're taking. You need to explain why this is so important."

“I told them I have to save the world,” he said. I’m not sure how to raise the stakes from there. I mean, yes, I might be saving the universe, but probably not. Dawn thinks it should be able to handle Earth’s destruction.”

“You were very vague about the details.”

“Because I didn’t want an army of Network goons racing me to this door.”

“They’re an army of goons, now?”

“You’d prefer the term faceless henchmen?”

“How about faceless henchpeople?”

“I can work with that.”

“Jason!” Itsuki exclaimed, arriving above deck after exploring the boat. “Your familiar is incredible!”

“Mate, you seriously need to learn to how to read body language,” Jason said, disentangling himself from Asya.

“What?” Itsuki asked with an oblivious expression.

“Never mind,” Jason said. “You know, I actually met Shade before he became my familiar, even though I summoned him. I had recently met this new friend, Emir, who was holding a competition. I originally met Farrah and her companions because they were working for him, as it happens, but they were out of town when he arrived and he came looking for me...”

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The boat was anchored in a lagoon at an uninhabited island, waiting for low tide. Jason had suggested Shade take a submersible form but Denji explained that there were magic protections they would need to move past. As a result, Jason, Erika, Emi, Asya, Farrah and Itsuki were swimming in the turquoise waters.

Yumi and Dawn were chatting with Denji and Koya, who were startled at the revelation of Dawn’s true identity, much of which she had to explain to them. She was a treasure trove of knowledge about the very concepts around which their clan had been built and found her company a revelation.

Sunset colours were working their way into the sky as the tide grew low enough to largely reveal the sea cave into which they would be heading. The swimmers reboarded and they beached the boat, which then vanished into Jason’s shadow, depositing the passengers onto the soft sand. Sorting out who would and wouldn’t go into the cave, Emi protested when told she wouldn’t be going in.

“I’ve been hidden away this whole time! What was the point of bringing me?”

"I know, Moppet, and I'm sorry," Jason said. "I knew that people would probably try to kill me, because they usually do, but I didn't expect the whole Asano clan to turn on us. Akari's Nan really bugged up the trip. But this is a sacred place for the Tiwari clan, not a tourist spot."

Koya and Denji shared a glance, both nodding.

"Since she is your niece, Mr Asano," Koya said, "we are willing to bring her along, given your status in this. She can bear witness, alongside my son."

"Alright," Jason said. "But I want quiet, and I want respectful, young lady. Is that understood?"

Emi nodded eagerly, a huge grin on her face.

"I also need your mother's permission," he added, upon which Emi turned a weaponised expression of longing on her mother.

"Is it safe?" Erika asked.

"For her, yes," Denji said. "Only Jason will face any challenges within."

"Wait," Jason said with exaggerated panic. "Is it safe for me?"

"I believe so," Denji said.

"You believe so? I'm not feeling the confidence."

"Stop being a coward," Farrah said.

"Cowards live!"

"Well, you keep dying, so clearly that's not you."

"Why am I always the one who has to save the world," he muttered petulantly. "No one tells Kaito he has to save the world."

"Seriously?" Erika asked.

"For him, it's all, 'Kaito, fly around in your helicopter with your wavy hair,' and 'Kaito, team up with this hard-edged, implausibly attractive detective and solve crimes.'"

Watching the exchange with increasing misgivings, Denji leaned towards his brother.

"Have we made a very bad mistake, here?" he whispered.

"It's probably fine," Koya said. "I was having Itsuki tell me about anything he learned from the Asano girl while she was living with them in Australia. Some of the things she told him are starting to make a lot more sense."

"I hope you're right."

## Chapter 379

### An Unexpected Direction

Jason walked over the surface of the water with his niece, his cloak wrapped around them both to keep her body light. The Tiwari patriarch also walked over the water, while Itsuki and his father rode in an inflatable dinghy. Motes of light emerged from Jason's cloak, spreading out to illuminate the cave in soft starlight.

"It's pretty," Emi said.

"I've always thought so," Jason said. "So much of what I do is ugly, so I quite like this."

Some distance into the cave, the floor rose above the water level due to the low tide and all five people stood on the wet sand from which the water had receded.

At the back of the cave was a hewn wall carved from the solid stone, with metal rungs set into it. Jason spotted the pockmarks where the rungs had corroded away and been replaced several times over the centuries.

"There's no magic here," Jason said, tilting his head. "It's deeper. Much, much deeper."

"You can sense that?" Koya asked.

"Barely, and only because I was looking for it. The logistical problems involved in sinking a mineshaft on a tropical island are formidable. Without magic to keep the shaft sealed and reinforced, maintenance must be an issue."

"The founder didn't want anyone to notice a patch of magic in the middle of nowhere by happenstance," Denji explained. "The wall holds back the high tide and there's a shaft on the other side, going deep enough that the magic down there is undetectable from the outside. Unless your magical senses are absurdly powerful, anyway."

"How are your senses so strong?" Itsuki asked Jason.

"Supernatural senses – that's your magic and aura detection," Jason explained, "are a function of your aura, like a radar tower sending out signals. Except not, but for the purposes of this analogy it's close enough. A stronger aura is like a stronger radar emitter, giving you're a more powerful sense of your surroundings."

"I'd love to have senses that strong," Itsuki said.

"Be careful what you wish for," Jason told him. "Not every power is worth the price."

Jason leapt lightly up to the top of the wall and used an extending shadow arm to pull Emi up after him. He opened his inventory and took out a necklace with a blue jewel.



“This will let you breathe if the air gets a bit sketchy down there,” Jason said as he affixed it around her neck. “Ready?”

Emi flashed him a grin and they jumped off, Jason’s cloak allowing them to float down. Motes of light from Jason’s cloak trailed them like fairy dust as they descended for what felt like an eternity until they finally emerged from the shaft into a large chamber and set down on the floor.

Jason’s starlight motes spread out to reveal a five-sided room. Each wall was made up of liquid-smooth marble whose colouration reminded Jason of the light generated by transcendent damage. The marble was white with streaks of blue, silver and gold, with an aperture in each wall the size of a human head. There was a soft white light shining from each of the five apertures.

This far down, the magic was not just detectable but intimidating. Between gods and the Builder, Jason had experienced enough transcendent-rank power to recognise it when he experienced it. Fortunately, he could also sense that it was at some kind of remove, preventing it from overwhelming him. He glanced at Emi, who didn’t even seem to notice it due to her lack of aura senses. She was eagerly looking around the room.

“Where’s the door?” she asked. “Has the door been a metaphor this whole time?”

“We’ll have to wait until the others get down here,” Jason said. He could sense the three clansmen slowly descending the shaft.

“If they tell us the door was inside us all along,” Emi said, “I’m going to need you to beat them up.”

Jason laughed, tousling his niece’s hair.

“Uncle Jason,” she complained, pushing his hand away.

The three Tiwari men dropped through the ceiling on the end of magical ropes, their feet slipped into loops at the end.

“How does this work?” Jason asked.

“It’s quite simple,” Denji explained. “You can sense the power of it, yes? How it’s sealed away?”

“Yes.”

“You stand in the middle of the room and concentrate – after the rest of us are out of the way.”

Jason looked around the clean pentagon that made up the room.

“Out of the way where?”

“We can stand in the corners, where the walls meet,” Koya said. “So long as we’re clear of the apertures in the middle of the walls, we’ll be unaffected.”

“You’ll find the power quite easy to access,” Denji said. “Enduring it is up to you.”

“So, I just want the door to open and it does?” Jason asked. “That sounds suspiciously like the door was inside me all along.”

Emi snorted a laugh.

“That’s not how it works at all,” Denji said. “Be aware that the power you will be exposed to is vast. None of our people have ever been able to endure it and enter the door. Only on hearing about your powerful aura did we seriously consider that you might be the person we were waiting for. That will hopefully allow you to resist the power long enough to gain passage.”

The others moved to the side of the room, at the point where two of the pentagonal chamber’s five walls met.

“You are responsible for the safety of my niece while I’m otherwise indisposed,” Jason told the Tiwari men. “I recommend you take that responsibility very seriously.”

“Of course,” Koya said.

“No,” Jason said. “This is not a matter of course. You keep her safe or you’ll wish your clan had used a better poison on me.”

“Uncle Jason, don’t be a dick. They know you’ll wipe out their whole clan if anything happens to me. You don’t have to rub their noses in it.”

“Sorry Moppet.”

The Tiwari men looked from Jason to his niece with pale expressions.

“Okay,” Jason said, rubbing his hands eagerly as he made his way into the centre of the room. “Let’s give this a try.”

Jason moved into the middle of the room and extended his senses. The power in the room answered immediately, transcendent light beaming out from the apertures in each wall, meeting in the middle to shine directly on him. The power crashed over him in a tsunami of pure, clean, magic, drowning him in it like the aura suppression of a god. Even Jason’s powerful aura was like a paper boat in a hurricane, blasted away in an instant.

Jason forced his eyes open to check on the others, who were unaffected as promised. He paid them no more mind, gritting his teeth as he stood against the storm of magic. It was not Jason’s first transcendent-rank rodeo, however, nor his first time having his aura pounded down to nothing. It felt like he was being squeezed in a giant fist but he endured with little more than a grim expression. Suddenly the light vanished and Jason vanished with it.

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Jason felt like something was trying to pull his body apart but the sensation passed after just a moment. His vision swam into focus and he found himself in an alien landscape filled with amber light. A pair of windows popped up to obscure his view.

- 
- You have entered a space of combined physical and astral nature. You have gained an instance of [Dimensional Discorporation] and will periodically gain additional instances until you leave this space.
  - You are a gestalt entity combining physical and astral nature; [Dimensional Discorporation] has no effect.
  - You have resisted [Dimensional Discorporation].
  - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
  - You have gained an instance of [Integrity].
- 

Jason dismissed the first window, reflecting on the foresight in the ability the World-Phoenix had designed for him. It irked him to be dancing to someone else's tune but he was forced to admit that, as much as he mistrusted anyone or anything with that much power, the World-Phoenix had given him much. From coming back from the dead to bringing him home, it had asked no more in return thus far than things he would have done anyway.

Closing the first window cleared his vision a bit and he glanced around, discovering the place he found himself in was very much not the subterranean chamber he had just come from. The amber light that was the first thing he'd noticed was thick to the point of rendering the world around him monochromatic. Just as thick as the light was the aura suffusing everything, so powerful it seemed almost solid. He was on a small rise under an open sky, the terrain around him generally flat but uneven ground. It was covered in grass, with fragmentary ruins sticking out of the turf.

Seeing no immediate threats, or much of anything at all, he took a look at the second window.

- 
- You have entered a domain of the Builder.
  - By entering this domain you have subjected your soul to the influence and authority of the Builder. You have gained an instance of [Builder's Dominion].
  - Your soul has learned to reject the influence and authority of the Builder; [Builder's Dominion] has no effect.
  - You have resisted [Builder's Dominion].
  - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
  - You have gained an instance of [Integrity].
-

"Dawn didn't warn me about that," Jason snarled. "I think we need to have a little conversation."

"As do you and I," said a voice. Jason looked in that direction to see a man emerge from behind the shattered remnant of a vaguely Greek column. The man had a sharp suit, an expensive haircut, dark eyes and a predator's smile.

"It's about time you showed up," the man said. "I'm a busy man, Mr Asano, but I knew you'd get here eventually. I was confident that whoever sent you back to this world would make sure you were up to the task, which is why I never bothered to stop my people from trying to kill you. If they succeeded, you weren't good enough for what needs to be done anyway."

"You have me at a disadvantage," Jason said.

"Oh, you have no idea," the man said, grinning like a snake who found a nest full of baby mice. "I have many names, but the one you are most likely to know is Mr North."

"The leader I was told the EOA didn't have," Jason said. "You have a lot to answer for."

"But now is not the time," Mr North said.

"Are you sure that's your choice to make?"

"No, it's yours, but you're a smart man, Mr Asano. More or less."

Jason paused to take stock, pushing his senses to their limits. Detecting anything through the oppressive aura suffusing the space around them was like pushing through treacle but he managed to get a read on Mr North.

"You're gold rank."

Mr North's only response was another Cheshire grin.

"What are you?" Jason asked. "You're not an essence user. Some kind of native magical creature? But Earth doesn't have those. And there's something else..."

Jason's eyes went wide.

"You're a familiar. A bonded familiar but your bond has been severed."

"Your senses are as sharp as advertised, noticing that much in this place. I was a rune spider, originally, although I've come so very far from those days. Becoming a familiar offers a creature like me many opportunities if you look at things in the long term. You do have to pick your essence user with care. Someone who will rank up well, obviously, but there are other pitfalls. As I came to discover."

"Your essence user died?"

Jason's first encounter with a native magical creature had been the familiar of Landemere Vane, both the first person he met from another world and the first person he killed. Vane's familiar had tried to take revenge, only to fall victim to aging masonry.

"My essence user did die," Mr North said. "That was not until after our bond was severed, however. You've heard of bonded familiars parting ways with their essence users, yes?"

"I have. The connection is intimate, so when the familiar and the essence user become irrevocably at odds, the bond breaks."

"My essence user was blinded by faith. Sacrifice after sacrifice, giving up power and prestige to lift up a bunch of savages."

"The Network founder was your essence user," Jason realised. "That's how you knew about this place."

"Just so," Mr North said. "It's so nice to talk to someone quick on the uptake. My own minions were quite disappointing before Adrien Barbou came along. Thank you for putting him in a position to come my way. If the Lyon branch's plans had worked out better, I'd have missed out on a quality subordinate."

Jason narrowed his eyes.

"You're what happened to the Network founder, aren't you?"

"I am," Mr North said. "Trussed him up and handed him off to some gentlemen in Philadelphia. This was back in the colonial days, long before the Network proper. They didn't have the power to take him down, of course, leaving me to do all the work. I felt bad, later, about the unpleasant end my bond-mate came to. We were so close, once, after all. I was quite angry at the time, though, and I've been reaping the benefits of that deal ever since. It gave the US network branches quite the head start, once the magic started ticking up."

"The US network branches are feeding the EOA resources and information?"

"Only a few critical members," Mr North said. "For the most part, their animosity to my little organisation is quite genuine. Feel free to tell them; they're a little too unified at the moment. A little internal strife would serve me well."

"Why are you here and what do you want?"

"For you, obviously. This world needs saving and I've put a lot of work into it. I need to make sure you do it right."

## Chapter 380

### Parade of Delights

In an otherworldly realm washed in amber monochrome, Jason was face to face with Mr North, the head of the Engineers of Ascension.

“Saving the world the right way requires your guidance, does it?” Jason asked. “You’ll forgive me for not taking you at your word.”

“Repairing the link between worlds is just the beginning,” Mr North said. “If you make a mistake now, we’ll all pay for it later.”

“Oh, so you’re an altruist.”

“It’s not inconsistent with selfishness to save the planet you’re standing on, Mr Asano.”

“What is this subsequent threat I need to be wary of?”

“While I recognise that being more forthcoming would help establish trust,” Mr North said, “that isn’t a feasible approach at this time. If you learn too much now, things won’t go the way they need to. Suffice to say that you will learn, in time, and you won’t be happy about it.”

“You’re not exactly selling it, here.”

“I know having things kept from you isn’t what you want, Mr Asano, but it’s what you need. It won’t feel like it, but I’m helping you right now. Even telling you this much may be compromising too much.”

“Then why are you here?” Jason asked. “If you wanted to not tell me things, you could have done that from home.”

“I need to set you on the path. The day will come, Mr Asano, when you and I become allies.”

“You’re responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths.”

“I don’t deny it. Not to you, anyway. That doesn’t change the reality.”

“I could just kill you here,” Jason said.

“You could try,” Mr North said. “I’m gold rank but not an essence user. The odds would be in my favour but you’ve beaten long odds before. You have a way of coming through in the critical moments I won’t underestimate. It would be a risk, though. You have responsibilities. Will you put your ability to meet them in jeopardy just to punish me for past injustices?”

“I think you’ve got plenty of injustice left in you,” Jason said. “How much death and misery is prevented if you die in this hole?”

“It’s just the opposite, Mr Asano. You’re here to save the world this time, but I’m the only one getting ready for next time.”

“Which you aren’t going to tell me about.”

“Correct.”

At his side, Jason’s fingers twitched, eager to conjure his dagger and lunge at the man in front of him.

“How do you see this going?” Jason asked.

“You’re here for the door,” Mr North said. “I’m here to make sure you don’t just claim it but absorb it.”

“Absorb it?”

“It’s critical that the door cannot be taken from you by anyone. It has to become a part of you.”

“How does a door become part of me?”

“It’s not a literal door, Mr Asano, although it often appears as such. It’s an astral construct with the power to manifest in physical reality in the form of a portal. Much the same principle as your portal archways.”

“This door is an object of the Builder.”

“Yes.”

“The Builder has tried to worm his way into my soul before. I’m not giving him another shot.”

“It has?”

“Someone tried to shove a star seed up in me.”

“And it didn’t work?” Mr North laughed. “Mr Asano, you are a parade of delights. It seems that I couldn’t have asked for anyone better. You need to take this particular object off the Builder’s hands.”

“So say you. You could easily be his lackey, setting me up for a fall. You don’t seem to be bothered by the Builder’s influence in this place.”

“My bond-mate’s deity and the Builder long ago came to an accord regarding your world and the other. While my bond-mate is long dead, I still enjoy an amnesty from the Builder’s incidental attentions.”

“Again, I have nothing to go on but the word of a man who should be on trial in The Hague.”

“Let me show you, and you can decide for yourself. I’ve made no small preparations for this.”

“I’ll go along with this. For now.”

Mr North grinned.

“If you were near the end of silver, instead of just the beginning, this would be a very different conversation, wouldn't it?”

“It wouldn't be a conversation.”

“So intimidating.”

“Just get on with it.”

“Of course. Follow me, Mr Asano. We need to go to the heart of this little realm.”

The amber-lit terrain was uneven but mostly flat grassland, dotted with fragmentary ruins. As he followed Mr North, Jason's eyes picked out chunks of ruin sticking out of the ground that looked Greek, Cambodian and Mayan, along with more alien elements that would not have looked out of place on the cover of some Lovecraftian fiction.

“You are not what I expected, Mr North.”

“You're the only person I've seen in centuries who has been to my home world, Mr Asano. I feel like I can be myself around you. With the EOA I have this need to be the stern and sinister authoritarian figure, which can be fun, but it gets tiring after a while. That being said, I've heard you're not above playing the sinister authoritarian yourself. You should consider joining, now that you're no longer affiliated with the Network. I know that might seem like an outrageous proposition but have you considered that if you were part of the leadership, you could take the organisation in a more positive direction. You wouldn't even have to take orders from me. We could be partners. Maybe even friends.”

“Do you know what a nightmare hag is, Mr North?”

“It's some kind of fear monster, right?”

“It's an astral being, not a monster, but yes. It takes things from your deepest fears and makes them manifest. Would you like to know what it showed me?”

“I'm not sure I grasp the purpose of this conversational segue but do tell.”

“It showed me a version of myself that could be friends with you.”

“You do realise how self-centred it is that your greatest fear is some version of yourself, right?”

Mr North led Jason to a small dell that had been hard to notice with the light washing out the geographical features. At the bottom was a series of large standing stones, arranged in a circle. The stones were the same marble as the walls of the pentagon room through which Jason had entered the realm; white with veins of blue, silver and gold. The stones hadn't been polished slippery smooth, however, looking rough-hewn and weathered.



Mr North made his way down the slope of the dell, with Jason following after. Mr North pointed out a series of wooden crates on the grass inside the stone circle.

“Prying this place out of the Builder’s control and into yours will be an intricate and elaborate process,” Mr North said. “I’ve been gathering the materials we need for longer than you’ve been alive. I’ll start talking you through the process as we start unpacking it all.”

As they reached the circle of stones, Jason reached out and touched one.

---

Item: [Fundament Gate] (transcendent rank, legendary)

???. (???, ???).

- Effect: ???.
- Effect: ???.
  
- Your soul’s ability to resist the Builder’s influence and your [Spirit Vault] ability allow you to incorporate this item into your spirit vault. Doing so will purge the Builder’s influence and the item’s effects, instead altering your abilities.
- This item’s impact on your abilities will be diminished due to your rank being lower than that of the item. The effect will further increase as your rank increases.
- Once incorporated, this object cannot be removed or made use of by anyone else. Incorporating this item into your spirit vault will affect the following abilities:
- [Spirit Vault]: Your ability to sense Builder-related items and resist their effects will be significantly increased. You will be able to directly attack Builder-related items using soul attacks.
- [Path of Shadows]: This ability will gain an additional effect. If you can comprehend the fundamental aspects of an area of physical reality, you can open a portal to a manifested space where those fundamental aspects can be accessed. Such spaces will be semi-physical and semi-astral in nature and will negatively affect anyone without both a physical body and an astral affinity.

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Jason appeared to be staring blankly as he read the screen Mr North couldn’t see.

“What are you spacing out about?” Mr North asked. “We have hours of work ahead of us. I just hope your astral magic is up to scratch or this will take even longer.”

Jason ignored him, still staring into space.

“Asano?”

Jason reached out and touched the stone again and darkness started spreading over it like a shadow was passing over. White stone became opaque, like smoked glass, with

the blue, silver, and gold veins becoming twinkling lights within the darkness. The stone had turned completely dark and the other stones started following suit.

Mr North turned his head wildly, watching the stones change.

“What did you do?”

“I hate to break it to you, Mr North, but smugly thinking you know what the enemy you’re trying to turn into an ally will do is a good way to get slapped down. I learned that the hard way myself.”

Jason waved his arm and an obsidian portal arch rose up in the middle of the circle. The stones started to break down, dissolving into dust. The dust was drawn through the air, as if by a vacuum, getting sucked into the dark portal.

“WHAT DID YOU DO?”

“Since we won’t be needing them anymore,” Jason said as he picked up one of the wooden crates, “I’m just going pop these into the old dimensional space. Waste not, want not, yeah?”

Mr North looked on in horror as the stones crumbled away, while Jason started shoving crates into his inventory.

“You’ve ruined everything.”

“Oh, calm down. You wanted me to absorb the magic door, right? I’m absorbing the magic door.”

“You can’t just absorb it because you want to!”

“No, *you* can’t just absorb it because you want to. I’m a man of many talents. Cooking, absorbing magic doors...”

Jason frowned, pausing with another crate in his arms.

“Alright,” he acknowledged. “Two talents. And my sister is better at one of them, but still. I hope Kaito isn’t any good at absorbing magic doors. Probably not; that would be weird.”

The obsidian arch of the portal was slowly transmuting as it absorbed the dust from the stones, turning from pure black to a smoky crystal with blue, silver and gold shimmers within.

“Why are you talking nonsense?” Mr North asked. “This space is going to break down, and us with it!”

“Yeah? Hang on a bit.” Jason quickly stowed the last two crates, the last of the stones crumbling to nothing as he did. He then looked around.

“Seems fine to me.”

The ground lurched and the amber light started taking on streaks of red tint.

“Oh, there it is,” Jason said. “Come on; out we pop.”

He then stepped through the arch into which all the stones had vanished. Mr North looked around at the space unravelling around them and scrambled after him.

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In the pentagonal room at the bottom of the shaft, Emi was running her fingers over the smooth marble, marvelling at the slick smoothness, almost devoid of friction.

“The wall is getting warmer,” she said.

“Oh?” Koya asked and the three Tiwari men put their hands to the wall.

“You’re right,” Denji said.

“Does that mean Mr Asano did something?” Itsuki asked.

“That’s what we came here for,” Denji said. “Let’s hope he did it right.”

“The wall is changing colour,” Emi said, stepping back from it warily, the others joining her.

They watched as the white marble walls turned grey, as if the vital essence were being leeches from them. The apertures in the middle of each, still emitting a soft glow, started to dim. Once the light of the apertures had completely gone out and all the colour was gone from the walls, the walls crumbled like sand, spilling onto the floor. Behind them was the plain stone from which the shaft had been dug, identical to the stone under their feet.

In the middle of the room, a line of dark appeared on the floor, from which rose a portal arch, instead of the familiar obsidian, the arch was murky crystal with lights shining dimly within. The dark void filling the portal was the same, from which Jason stepped out to be caught in a limpet hug by his niece.

“Look out Moppet,” Jason said, lifting her up, still attached to him, and moving her out of the way. Another person stumbled out, after which the portal disappeared into the floor.

Mr North’s expression became stern as he stood up straight, panning the room with a stern glare as he adjusted his tie and cuffs. The grinning, languid man Jason had met was nowhere to be seen, Mr North’s sharp eyes taking in the scene before settling on Jason.

“For all our sakes, Mr Asano,” he said, his voice gravel hard, “I hope you haven’t made a terrible mistake.”

“Caution has its place,” Jason said, “but the first step of doing the impossible is having the nuggets to try.”

“I will take my leave.”

“It won’t be today, Mr North,” Jason said, “but the day will come where you and I have a reckoning.”

“I know you like to be dramatic, Mr Asano, but you’ll find yourself with much bigger problems than me to deal with. Assuming you didn’t just ruin everything.”

Mr North directed his arms at the ground and threads of web shot from his sleeves. He used it to draw a complex sigil on the ground, which lit with pale blue light when it was completed. He stepped onto the sigil and it rose into the air, swiftly carrying Mr North up and into the shaft.

“Who was that?” Denji asked. “Where did he come from?”

“Magic Spider-Man?” Emi suggested.

“That was Mr North, the head of the EOA,” Jason explained.

“And you let him go?”

“He’s category four, Patriarch,” Jason said. “He let us go.”

“How can he be category four?” Koya asked. “How would he sustain himself?”

“He’s had access to the door for centuries. I imagine he has a stockpile of the objects the magical world will soon be fighting over.”

## Chapter 381

### Collateral Damage

Dawn, Erika, Yumi and Asya were on the sandy beach of the lagoon, waiting for the others to emerge from the sea cave. Jason and the others emerged on black jet skis that dissolved into darkness as they beached themselves on the sand. Erika snatched her daughter into a worried hug and Farrah slapped Jason on the arm.

“Got it done?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said.

Dawn had been staring at Jason even before they left the cave, her gaze unerringly locked onto his aura through the stone.

“What did you do?” Dawn asked him. “The transcendent strain in your aura has been strengthened. It may only offer flavour, rather than power, but it is a startling thing to detect in an aura at your rank. It might be intimidating but it will also draw attention.”

“Probably for the best that he can hide his aura so well, then,” Farrah said.

“Yes, it is,” Dawn said. “What does have power is the force inside your aura antithetical to the Builder. Most people wouldn’t recognise it, but I’m familiar enough with the Builder to know what it is. It was there the first time we met, but now the glowing ember is a burning flame.”

“The Builder and his freaky cyborg army killed a lot of people in the other world, including both Farrah and myself,” Jason said. “I am antithetical to the Builder.”

“You’ll be lucky if any of the Builder’s adherents don’t attack you on sight after sensing that aura,” Dawn said.

“I’ll consider myself lucky if they do,” Jason said. “Rooting out those infiltrating pricks is something I’ve done before and I’ll be more than happy to do again.”

“So, this is it,” said Denji. “Our clan has fulfilled its purpose. Now I am unsure of what course to chart.”

As Tiwari clan patriarch, it was Denji’s duty to lead a clan now riddled with fissures. Large portions of the clan had treated their long-held purpose as mythological, so Jason’s arrival had left many uncertain or angry. Denji would be required to lead his clan to a new purpose.

“The first thing is to consolidate the clan in the wake of our new reality,” Denji’s brother, Koya, said. “Things will be uncertain as we choose our own destiny, but we must move forward together.”

“Father is right, Uncle Denji,” Itsuki said. “We will all be together.”

"We are far from a unified force, son," Koya said, "I think it might be a good time to broaden your horizons. Mr Asano, I was hoping that you might take Itsuki under your wing for a time."

Itsuki's eyes went wide at the idea.

"You might not want to do that," Emi said. "He may learn more about the A-Team than magic powers."

"The old Liam Neeson movie?" Itsuki asked.

"Oh, holy, crap," Jason said. "What have you been teaching this boy? He definitely needs to have his education expanded upon."

"Did I miss something?" Koya asked.

"Clearly," Erika said. "Does your son even know who George Peppard is?"

"The male lead from Breakfast at Tiffany's?" Koya asked. "What is going on?"

"You can just ignore them," Yumi said. "My grandchildren have skewed views on certain cultural properties. You should also ignore Breakfast at Tiffany's. Mickey Rooney as a Japanese man? Excruciating."

"You know what's worse?" Jason asked. "That movie where Obi-Wan Kenobi plays a man named Koichi Asano."

"That movie," Denji growled. "I can only imagine how aggravating it must be to have your name being used like that."

Asya wrapped her arm inside Jason's.

"If I had a bingo card for you," she told him, "I'd have just crossed off 'get the patriarch of an ancient Japanese clan to complain about old movies during a treasure hunt on a deserted tropical island.'"

"That's a very specific bingo card."

"Yours would be," she said. "There really is no one quite like you."

"Yeah, I'm not like the other girls," Jason said.

"If you two are going to make out," Emi said, "could you save it for the plane? Also, can we get a plane?"

"Shade is my familiar, Moppet. You can't just tell him to..."

Darkness streamed out of Jason's shadow to take the form of a plane, blasting down air as it hovered in place. One of Shade's bodies emerged from Jason and stood next to Emi.

"Would you like to come aboard, Miss Emi?" Shade said loudly, over the rush of air.

"Traitor," Jason accused.

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The Tiwari men were returned to Japan and Itsuki went off with his father to pack his things. Souta Tiwari, who had been looking into Jason's poisoning, met them on arrival. He offered to report to Jason, who said that he was uninterested in Tiwari clan affairs. Jason already knew everything from the Shade dwelling in Souta's shadow and it truly was internal Tiwari affairs. Jason had bigger things to deal with than some disgruntled clansmen, although if they'd gone after his family, instead, it would be a different story.

"Mr Asano," Souta said as they waited for Itsuki to return. "The Japanese authorities came to find you during your absence. We truthfully told them that you had already departed, but it might be time for you to bring this trip to Japan to an end."

"Well, I did set off a bunch of car bombs, so I can hardly blame them. Good thing you tried to murder me or I'd feel bad about bringing that to your door."

Souta gave Jason an awkward smile.

"Don't worry, mate. We'll be off and away promptly."

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Koya looked at his son, madly shoving things into the dark, floating orb that was the aperture to Itsuki's storage space.

"This is an important opportunity, son, but while I know you admire Mr Asano, do not lose sight of how dangerous he is."

"We are all dangerous, Father. We've both killed many monsters."

"That's not what I mean. You need not fear the man who kills, for all you need to do is be better. Fear the man who kills, then smiles and laughs like it is any other day. That man has no lines, whatever he might tell you. Or tell himself."

"I don't think he's like that," Itsuki said. "Look at the things he's done. It's clear how hard he's trying to be a good man."

"Exactly," Koya said. "Good men don't have to try."

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On the way back to Australia, Jason, Farrah and Dawn sequestered themselves in a cabin to discuss the next move.

"If you absorbed the door, you should have some idea of how it operates," Dawn said to Jason.

"Yes," he agreed, "although how to operate it properly is another matter. I'm going to need to advance my knowledge of astral magic or I'll just fumble around, accomplishing nothing."

“I can continue to help you with that,” Dawn said. “In the meantime, Miss Hurin can work on our own system to tap into the grid, now that you have lost access to Network resources.”

“We’re going to need access?” Farrah asked.

“As best I can understand,” Jason said, “the underlying makeup of reality is made of nodes, of which just this planet has an incalculable number. Fuelling those nodes are what you might call reality cores. Batteries for the universe. These are the things that everyone is going to be fighting over.”

“These events you described taking place after the grid goes back up,” Farrah said to Dawn. “They’re going to reveal these reality cores?”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “As best as I can determine, each event will reveal one, which you can expect the magical factions to be fighting over.”

“What about the proto-spaces?” Farrah asked.

“They will continue, and we need to use them,” Dawn said. “They represent the points at which the dimensional membrane around this reality is most strained. There, rituals to find the altered nodes will be more effective, allowing us to detect them over a wider area.”

“As best we can tell, the Network founder used the door to create the imbalance in the link and then founded the Network to slow down the damage once it escalated,” Jason explained. “The whole reason the link between worlds is out of whack is that the door was used to modify specific nodes. That’s what we need to track down: the nodes the founder modified, so we can restore them to what amounts to factory default.”

“It will be quite hit and miss at first,” Dawn said. “As more of the link is normalised, the rest will start to stand out and our successes will accelerate at the end.”

“Which will stop it siphoning magic from my world,” Farrah said. “That will finally trigger the oversized monster surge, giving the Builder’s forces a chance to invade.”

“Yes,” Jason said. “This world is just collateral damage. Unfortunately, the only way out is through. Someone like me coming along to fix the link was part of the plan. I’m going to be the trigger that starts the invasion.”

“There is no other option,” Dawn said.

“I know,” Jason said. “The only way out is through. We need to identify the nodes and fix the link, hopefully before the magical factions plunder too many of the nodes and the whole system is thrown off.”

“What if one of the nodes we need is affected by these events?” Farrah asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said.



“We will need to figure that out as we go,” Dawn said. “Even I can’t know that until I see it for myself. I suspect, though, that we will have an amount of leeway.”

“Meaning we don’t have to hit every node?” Jason asked. “That’s some welcome breathing room.”

“These are just educated guesses,” Dawn said. “It could well be that I am wrong and every affected node must be restored.”

“I guess we have a plan, then,” Farrah said. “If we’re going to be running around in proto-spaces, though, won’t the Network get grouchy?”

“Let them,” Jason said.

“A support team might be useful,” Farrah said. “Silvers would be best, but we have bronze-rankers we can trust. They can help keep the monsters and the Network off our backs while we’re operating in proto-spaces.”

“We can talk about it after we get back to Australia and take stock,” Jason said. “There are a lot of things up in the air right now.”

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Jason sat alone in his cloud house, in a dome beneath the water offshore of Asano Village. Emi was giving Itsuki a tour while Jason meditated, feeling completely safe for the first time since his second battle in Makassar. Some of his abilities even ranked up, although he knew that speed to be an illusion.

Early in a rank, abilities always went up faster, but with every rank, the later thresholds become harder and harder to pass. His powers might go up two or three ranks quickly now, but it would be a decade or more before they started reaching gold. He could only hope that the challenges ahead were enough to accelerate the timeline a little.

He had a monitor manifest out of a cloud wall and started watching the news. It was story after story on the changes currently rocking the world as everyday life and magic continued to collide.

“...it has been almost twenty-four hours since the last new monster wave, with waves that appeared before that point continuing to be dealt with across the globe. A Global Defense Network spokesperson claimed that under normal conditions, monster waves would no longer appear, although she did stress that regions that have ejected the GDN presence are not operating under normal conditions.”

A picture of the League of Heroes logo appeared on the screen.

“Questions continued to be asked about the League of Heroes that have taken over in the wake of GDN departures, specifically about the organisation behind them, the Engineers of Ascension. There is also the enigmatic and reclusive Cabal, although they

are yet to make any visible attempts to seize political power. The EOA, as they are commonly known, was first revealed by Jason Asano, who himself is coming under fire amid accusations of a series of car bombings in Japan...”

Jason flicked off the screen with a mental command and it sank into the cloud wall. He got up, walked through the cloud house, following the tunnel linked to the central underwater dome. He then took the tunnel to the airlock, leaving the cloud house for the tunnel system running under Asano Village. He took out the cloud flask, removed the stopper and placed the end into the physical aperture next to the airlock. The cloud house started breaking down and flowing into the flask.

Jason hadn't yet used the new form of his cloud flask, the palace, which became available when he had raised the flask to silver rank. He didn't expect the palace form to be as grand as Emir's, since Emir had already taken his flask to gold rank. The cloud house form had become more impressive at bronze-rank and Jason imagined the palace form would operate on the same principle. Even so, he did not anticipate being disappointed to only get a small palace.

He did not test the palace form after the cloud house had returned to the flask. Instead, he placed the flask in his inventory and sat in the small, underground tram cart that would carry him through the tunnels to Asano Village.

As he neared the village, he sensed Annabeth Tilden arrive at the main gate. The serene bushland of Asano Village allowed Jason's senses to be quite alert to distant events, compared to a crowded city where stimulus was so much heavier. His silver-rank spirit attribute helped him filter it all, but only at higher rank would he be able to actively monitor a whole city when he blanketed it with his senses.

Leaving the secret tunnels in the basement of the main residence, Jason hunted up Farrah and they went outside. Shade took the form of a car and drove them out to the main gate, where Annabeth was waiting in her own car. The Network Sydney branch committeewoman was accompanied by Nigel, the man in charge of the branch's tactical training, along with a pair of other silver-rankers.

Nigel had worked closely with Farrah as they revamped the Network's training program, with Nigel himself, a rare non-core user, soaring up to silver rank after using Farrah's training methods. Nigel had reached his rank in almost as little time as Jason.

Jason and Farrah stepped out of the cloud of darkness that their car turned into, while Anna and Nigel got out of their own car. Nigel conspicuously placed himself in a position to intervene if Jason or Farrah made a move on Anna. The other silver-rankers

stayed close to her person. Looking on were some lingering fringe types, religious zealots and conspiracy theorists still camped outside the main gate, although most had moved on.

“Really, Nige?” Jason asked, looking at Nigel in between himself and Anna.

“I hate it when people call me Nige.”

“I hate it when people betray me, so I guess we’re both out of luck. Hello, Anna.”

## Chapter 382

### I Intend to Do Damage

Annabeth Tilden and three silver-rankers were standing outside the main gate of Asano Village, facing Jason and Farrah.

"We didn't betray you, Mr Asano," Anna said.

"No?" Jason asked. "Then I guess the GDN spokesperson on the news stating that our association had been ended due to my increasingly dangerous and radicalised behaviour was a terrible mix up. I'm surprised Terrance made that kind of slip."

"You set off car bombs in traffic," Anna said.

"I'll do worse before I'm done," Jason said. "The thing is, Anna, I am dangerous and radicalised. I have been from the beginning. Remember when I first came back? Faith healing my way through a hospital and rolling a rolling gunfight in the streets? Since I started working with the Network I've been holding back but now you've cut those fetters. You opened the floodgates, Anna. You don't get to complain when the water comes through."

"It doesn't have to be like this, Asano."

"As long as I eat the fact that you're attacking me in the news, stay quiet and do as I'm told? Why are you here, Anna?"

"Can we talk where there aren't a bunch of hungry loons filming us on camera phones?" she asked. Just as she said, the fringe elements camping outside Asano Village had no short of people filming them as they spoke.

"The village is for guests, friends and allies, Anna. I'm not saying the village's defences are impregnable, but if you want in, it'll take more than the four of you."

"We aren't your enemy, Jason. I'm here to try and stop us from reaching that point. There are forces larger than either of us who see you as an antagonistic force, but if you're willing to make some concessions, we can stop this from escalating into conflict."

"Concessions?" he growled, taking a step forward that prompted her bodyguard, Nigel to step between them. Jason stopped, closed his eyes and after a moment, the tense rage passed out of his shoulders.

"This is you, genuinely trying to help me," Jason said softly. "You want to mend fences; I understand that. I respect it. I'm sorry, Anna, but they haven't told you why they turned on me in the first place, did they? It wasn't about car bombs."

"Then what?"

“Those greater forces you mentioned? I’m not sure how much they know, yet, but it’s only a matter of time before they realise that I have something they want. Something everyone will want. People are going to make some bad choices trying to get it and they will reap the consequences.”

“Is that a threat?” Anna asked.

Jason smiled.

“Since I came to this world,” he said, “I’ve been playing the essence user. It made sense to affiliate myself with the Network, given that their first priority was protecting the world from magic. That’s already changing. What’s coming will be a gold rush and an arms race, all in one. The old priorities will be gone.”

“So you say,” Anna said.

“Believe me or not, I don’t care,” Jason said. “I don’t need the Network or anyone but the people already standing with me. I’m done playing essence user and following the rules of this world. I’m an adventurer again.”

“What does that mean?” Anna asked.

“Adventurers get the job done,” Farrah said stepping up next to Jason. “We don’t have oversight or chains of command or public relations departments. We do what it takes, whoever or whatever gets in our way. The Adventure Society sees the job that needs doing and finds the people to do it. Right here, right now, the Adventure Society is us, and we’re the people for the job. We’re going to do what needs to be done and we’ll go through anyone or anything in our path, without hesitation, remorse or mercy. I like you, Anna, so I’m hoping that’s not you.”

“That’s what a threat sounds like, Anna,” Jason said. “This world needs saving. I don’t know if the people behind you understand the true threat or not and I don’t care anymore. Just don’t get in our way.”

“And what exactly does the world need saving from?” Anna asked.

“The dimensional incursions are getting worse,” Farrah said, “and the rate at which they’re getting worse is increasing. When we first arrived here, category three incursions were moving from the exception to the norm. Now we’re starting to see category four incursions. Do you really think they’re going to stop?”

“Are you claiming you’re going to stop the monsters from coming at all?” Anna asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “It could just be that we stop them from getting worse.”

“Then why not work with us?”

“Anna, I’ve worked with a lot of good people at the Network. You’re one of them. But not a lot of the good ones end up in charge. Think about the other members on the

steering committee. Do you trust them to do the right thing? Someone knows that when I do what I have to do, the power you're about to start fighting over will no longer appear. Anna, tell me that the people in charge will choose to address a looming threat over immediate gain."

"You know I can't."

"Then you need to look at your own loyalties and priorities. When you go home to Susan and look her in the eye, I bet you feel proud at the work you've done each day. You should. If you want to keep feeling that way, maybe start thinking about how much you let the International Committee dictate your choices."

"You're not my conscience, Jason. I make my own choices."

"Yet you came here to convince me to let you make mine?"

"There are people following you who will be caught up in your mess. Asya Karadeniz is throwing away her future by quitting the Network. Don't take her down with you."

"I actually hope you're right, Anna. I hope the Network doesn't lose its way. But the fact is, the Network and the monsters they fight were both inceptioned by the same person. Your house was always built on sand."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Network was never intended to protect the world from monsters. It was a regulatory measure so the dimensional incursions didn't destroy the world too quickly. A stop-gap until either someone like me came along to turn things back or the world was destroyed. Either result gets what the founder wanted, which is to open the gates of an entirely different world to invasion."

"Even if all that were true, and I'm not acknowledging that it is, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what someone centuries ago intended when it's the people of today that control the Network's destiny."

Jason smiled.

"I like that," he said. "I hope you have ambition, Anna. With people like you at the helm, the Network really could be what I think we both want it to be."

"Then instead of moving away from it, move closer. With what you have to offer, you could be a positive influence. Help me to make the Network everything it should be."

"That's not going to work, Anna. We both know that I chafe under restriction. I'm self-aware enough to know that I'm more trouble than I'm worth in an organisation. As soon as the group's ideals and mine come into conflict, we both know what I'll do. Call it independence or arrogance, but I work better from the outside."

"It's arrogance," Farrah said.

“Whose side are you on?” Jason asked her.

“Justice.”

Jason chuckled and stepped towards Anna, only for her silver-rank bodyguard, Nigel, to move into his way.

“If I wanted her dead, Nigel,” Jason said, “You wouldn’t see it coming, let alone have a chance to stop me.”

“It’s fine, Nigel,” Anna said and he begrudgingly let Jason past. Jason held out his hand and Anna shook it.

“I hope that we can work together again, someday, Anna. You’ll soon be learning why it can’t be today, though.”

“If you really do need to save the world, you can’t do it alone.”

“He’s not alone,” Farrah said.

“I suppose not,” Anna said. “But I know you feel isolated right now, Asano, and perhaps inclined to lash out. Just give your actions some consideration before you do anything drastic...”

She looked around at the people filming them with their phones.

“...like having a conversation like this in front of people who are probably live-streaming it. But I guess that was the point of having it here, wasn’t it?”

“If you play by your opponent’s rules, Anna, they get to decide who wins.”

“The idea is for all of us to win, Jason. There doesn’t have to be sides. I know you like playing chaos bringer but that will lash back on you to. And the people around you.”

Jason nodded.

“A lesson I never seem to learn properly,” he acknowledged. “I’m not your enemy, Anna. But if your organisation comes for me, it will be, and this is not the time for half-measures.”

Anna frowned.

“I hope things go well for both of us,” she said.

“So do I.”

“Why are you so certain the network will be at odds with you?”

“Dawn briefed you on the events about to take place. There’s no preventing them, only managing them, at least until I put a stop to them for good. What she didn’t tell you is that each event will contain a treasure that offers a path forward to those bottlenecked at the upper reaches of power. We’ve started calling them reality cores.”

“You’re saying that there’s a way beyond category three?”

“I’m sure you understand the ramifications,” Jason said. “The Network will be fighting the Cabal, the EOA and each other over the reality cores but they also won’t want me to turn off the spigot. Saving the world will stop it from getting fresh wounds for them to dig through for power.”

Anna looked around at the people filming them again.

“Jason, do you have any idea what you’ve done by releasing this information? Even if you’re lying, you’ve done incredible damage.”

“The Network, the Cabal and the EOA are about to start strip mining this planet for the things holding it together, even as forces threaten to tear it apart. I intend to do damage.”

“It’s time for me to leave,” Anna said. “After this conversation, I have to go get demoted.”

“I hope that isn’t true,” Jason said. “We need people like you.”

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Jason had called a family meeting in the sitting room of the main residence, with Erika, her husband, Ian, Emi, Jason and Erika’s father, Ken, their uncle, Hiro and grandmother, Yumi. They were all sat in armchairs and on couches while Jason and Farrah stood before them.

“I have something to tell you about how you’re going to spend the next few months,” Jason said, “and I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

“You’re going to stash us away somewhere,” Yumi said.

“Yes,” Jason said.

“What if we say no?” Erika asked.

“Then things will be awkward when I do it anyway.”

“Why?” Ken asked.

“Because I have something that people will want me to give them. Once they realise I can’t, they’ll want me to use it for them. If they take hostages to try and make me, I have to be able to say no. If you all are the hostages, I don’t trust that I can.”

“We built Asano Village to keep us safe,” Hiro said.

“And when the Network was at our backs, that was enough,” Farrah said. “Now that they’re at our gates, it isn’t.”

“Where is this deep, dark hole you want to throw us in?” Erika asked.

“The safest place I have access to. You can spend the time preparing for what comes after, if you still intend to travel with us to the other world. Emi can prepare for her chosen essences, since the ones I picked out were apparently not good enough.”



“Uncle Jason, you only picked those out to keep me safe,” Emi said.

“Good,” Erika said. “Emi, you’re taking those.”

Ian placed a hand on his wife’s shoulder.

“Eri, we need to let her be what she wants to be, not what we want her to be.”

“You’ll have plenty of time for discussion on that topic,” Jason said. “Emi won’t be ready for essences for about another year. As for you, Ian, I suggest you get ready to introduce some medical knowledge to a population that relies largely on magic and faith.”

“I don’t think that matters,” Ian said. “Working with essence users, I’ve learned that their bodies defy my medical understanding.”

“Do you remember my friend Jory, from my recordings of the other world?” Jason asked. “He is all about helping regular people, who do fall under your expertise. I think you’ll be the most exciting person he’s ever met in his life.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. Just before I last saw him, the church of the Healer gave him a mandate and funding to spread his methods around the world. You’re going to be a busy man. What all of you need to do is start learning some languages. Fortunately, you’re all essence users, except for Emi, who’s already been learning for months. I’m not sure I ever explained what a spirit attribute is, but you have one and it will positively affect your memory. You’ve probably already noticed.”

“So that’s it?” Erika asked. “You’re locking us away and we don’t get a say in it?”

“Yep.”

“And what if something happens to you?” she asked.

“Actually I’m pretty safe,” Jason said. “Word will soon be getting around about the magic door I have inside me. Not only will people want me alive to use it, but they will, eventually, want me to save the world with it. They’ll just want me to hold off until they’ve harvested as many reality cores as they can.”

“So, they’ll lock you up in a deep, dark hole, too,” Erika said.

“Probably, yeah. That’s why I need you safe.”

“What about Mum? Kaito?”

“They’ll be safe here,” Jason said. “It won’t be long before anyone who would go after my family realises that the people I would potentially compromise myself over aren’t here anymore.”

“And until they figure that out?”

“We’ll be operating a team out of the village in the short term,” Farrah said. “By the time we move on, anyone who would try will have investigated enough to know.”

“And what if they decide to try anyway?”

“Then things will get ugly,” Jason said.

“Why can’t you take everyone?” Emi asked. “You’re putting us in the cloud palace, right? Won’t there be room?”

“I’m not putting you in the cloud palace,” Jason said. “I considered it. Taking the whole family and stashing you at the bottom of the sea. But if the whole family vanishes, people are going to wonder why and go looking. If they find you while I’m on the other side of the planet, I can’t protect you.”

“Where do you want to put us, then?” Erika asked.

“There’s another reason I chose all of you and not any of the others,” Jason said. “All of you have been able to enter my spirit vault.”

## Chapter 383

### A Chance to Control the Narrative

Amy and Kaito had taken over the main residence of Asano Village when Erika's family was stashed away, cementing Amy's position as de facto mayor. Jason had claimed the bushland house previously occupied by his grandmother, where he delved into the study of astral magic. He wanted to be closer than where he had kept the cloud house underwater, so he could respond to threats rapidly without using his portal. He missed the cloud bed but had hung a hammock as a makeshift replacement

Jason put one of his many theory texts back into his inventory with the others. It was an evolving collection, starting with what Knowledge gave him and then adding in notes first from Clive and then Dawn. After studying for most of the day, he was mentally exhausted enough that he felt low on mana. A glance at the mana bar at the periphery of his vision told him otherwise. He contemplated the interface elements that were so familiar now that he would only really notice their absence.

The mana bar, the stamina bar and the little human shape that indicated his bodily health. He had come so far from when those elements had first appeared. Jason was still human-shaped, just like the health indicator, but he was so far from human anymore.

Dawn walked in and saw that he wasn't reading. She had also been staying in the house, to the slight chagrin of Asya. Asya had left her position with the Network but Jason did not want her living with him. Not only was it far too early in the relationship but Jason didn't want the distraction. He considered himself a disciplined man, but given the choice between dry magical theory and the soft lips of a beautiful woman, he knew he wasn't that disciplined.

"Need a break?" Dawn asked.

"Yeah," he said.

"Your ability to concentrate at your rank is much improved over baseline but even if you don't really have a brain anymore, keeping the mind fresh is important for learning. Taking regular breaks is sensible."

Jason nodded wearily and stumbled out on to the balcony to take in the scent of the bush. Dawn had been living with him for weeks, forcibly dragging his understanding of astral magic upward. Before they could use the magic door to start modifying nodes, they had to find the right nodes by conducting astral magic rituals in proto-spaces, where the dimensional walls were stretched thin.

Sending Dawn's avatar through proto-space apertures would be a questionable proposition so Jason would be required to carry out the necessary rituals. Farrah would obviously assist, being the superior ritualist, but astral magic was Jason's field, not hers, and his understanding of it had surpassed her basic knowledge.

Jason appreciated the education, knowing exactly how valuable Dawn's tutelage was. Jason chuckled to himself in anticipation of telling Clive about it. That did not make it any easier to slog through text after text as his understanding of astral magic grew.

It had been weeks since Jason has entered a proto-space to fight a monster while he awaited Farrah devising their own means of monitoring the grid. She knew the system the Network used well enough to replicate it easily, having used her own time on earth to explore magitech. The delay came from the need for additional functionality, over and above the Network's base system.

The most important additional feature was the ability to differentiate proto-spaces, not just by rank but by certain requirements determined by Dawn. Only some spaces would help them find the reality nodes Jason needed to modify using the magic door.

Another source of delay, but one both Jason and Dawn approved of, was an idea Farrah came up with while working on the grid detection system. The original plan was to turn the former Network liaison office in the village into a tracking station, until Farrah struck on the idea of incorporating the system into the cloud flask. Once she had a viable design, they needed to find the right components and feed them into the cloud flask. The incredibly sophisticated item would then be able to reproduce the functionality.

Jason was uncertain of the idea at first, but Farrah told him about the many times that Emir had done similar things with his own cloud flask, giving Jason a sense of assurance. If his cloud constructs were able to track events on the grid, they would have the flexibility to operate from the road.

While Jason and Farrah were engaged in their various tasks, a combat team was being put together. Asya, Jason's old friend Greg and Kaito had all worked together while working for the Network, and now they had left, formed the core of the new team. To their number was added Itsuki and Taika, leaving them with a lot of versatile attack options but lacking defensive and healing specialists.

The healing was resolved with an arrival from Japan. In the wake of Jason's visit, Shiro and his mother had entered a leadership battle for control of the clan and Shiro was concerned for the safety of his daughters, despite their silver-rank strength. He had contacted Jason, asking him to once again take in his daughter Akari, this time

accompanied by her sister, Mei. Not only were the sisters both silver-rank, but Mei was a healer.

Jason had warned Shiro, in no uncertain terms, that placing his daughters in Jason's company could be placing them in even greater danger. Shiro requested that Jason accept them anyway, sparking suspicion that Shiro was attempting to plant spies in Jason's camp. After the two women arrived, Jason rudely and forcibly scrutinised their auras as he questioned them, only after which was he finally satisfied they were not spies for their grandmother.

The arrival of Akari made the depth of Itsuki's crush on her painfully apparent, but Jason noted that for all of Akari's eye-rolling, he frequently spotted the pair together. Jason discussed the inclusion of Itsuki, Akari and Mei at length, both with the people themselves and their fathers, who had placed them all in his care. All three had lost their mothers young and were subsequently raised by stern, warrior men.

To Jason's surprise, both Shiro and Koya strongly advocated their children's inclusion in Jason's team. This was the point where Jason discovered that Network families shared the trait with adventurer families of pushing their little birds out of the nest.

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Itsuki was becoming antsy as days and weeks passed without his entering a proto-space. He was used to plunging into one after the other, which is how he had reached bronze-rank at an almost unheard-of pace. For this reason, Jason had Itsuki work extensively on meditation, consolidating the powers he had rushed to rank up.

"Something is troubling you," Jason said to Itsuki one day as they sat on the balcony of Jason's house. He had invited Itsuki to his house to discuss affliction specialist tactics but decided to ask the young man about the strain of uncertainty in his aura.

"It's more than just Akari being here or it being so long since you did any monster hunting," Jason clarified, and Itsuki nodded.

"It's something my father said before I left Japan."

"Oh?"

"He said that I should be careful of you."

"Sound advice," Jason said with a chuckle.

"I told him that you obviously work hard to be a good person."

"Thank you for noticing," Jason said. "I have my slip-ups but I do make a conscious effort."

"He told me that a good person doesn't have to try to be good."

“I see,” Jason said with a frown. “I’ll have to respectfully disagree with your father on that; what you just described tells me a lot about your father’s life. He was born into money and influence. When everything comes easy, it’s easy to be good. It costs you nothing, or so little as not to matter. I learned this for myself in the other world.”

Jason gave Itsuki a smile tinged with sadness.

“I would probably have said something similar, a few years ago. It was only when things got hard and I was truly put to the test that I discovered how fragile what I thought of as my bedrock principles really were. It was profoundly disappointing. Do you know what the opposite of good is, Itsuki?”

“Evil would be the obvious answer, but that’s not the answer you’re looking for.”

“You’re right. The opposite of good is easy. That may have been the moral of the last Harry Potter book, now that I think about it. Anyway, people don’t do bad things because there is some antagonistic force driving them to sin. They do them because when the right thing is hard, making little compromises doesn’t seem so bad. A shortcut here, a little selfishness when no one will ever know. Every step makes the next one a little easier.”

“That happened to you?”

“Yes, which is why I try hard to be diligent, now. I’ve learned enough about myself to know that I’m better off avoiding slippery slopes. I have arrogance and pride enough I could slide very low. I don’t want to speak poorly of your father, but claiming that there is some inherently good person out there who never has trouble making the right choice is naïve. But don’t take my word for it either. If you want to do things that are truly important, you’ll learn for yourself when the time comes and you have to make the hard choices.”

Itsuki looked conflicted.

“I’m not sure I feel better.”

“Good,” Jason said. “Be wary of anyone who is completely certain of the right path. I have been, from time to time, which has done some damage along the way.”

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Erika, her family and the others remained sequestered away in Jason’s spirit vault. Jason wanted to give the impression to the world that they had been stashed in some quiet corner of the earth, rather than being carried with him, and he did not doubt that amongst the residents of Asano Village were people acting as eyes for external powers.

Jason and Farrah regularly visited them in the spirit vault, both to help with the sense of isolation and to bring supplies. Jason’s silver-rank soul garden, inside his spirit vault, was larger and more elaborate than previous iterations. He had even found that he could manipulate it to a degree, adding living quarters to the multi-level central pavilion.

Jason's spirit vault could only be entered by those who trusted him completely. Erika and Emi had been able to enter from the beginning, as had Jason's father, Ken. Ken's brother Hiro turned out to be able to as well, having come to trust Jason, who had taken him from his old life and help restore him to the bosom of his family. Jason had hidden his secret delight when his grandmother, Yumi, had been able to enter.

Only three people not amongst Jason's blood relatives had managed to make their way into the spirit vault. Farrah was one and Asya was another, having finally made her way inside as her relationship with Jason deepened. The third person was Ian, Erika's husband. Farrah had been surprised at how easily Ian had entered the vault and asked him about it.

"I've known Jason since he was twelve years old," Ian had told her. "I've seen him at his highest and his lowest points. At the end of the day, what matters is that I know he would do anything for my little girl. We're here right now because Jason doesn't trust himself to choose the entire world over my wife and daughter. What matters next to that?"

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Even Dawn was uncertain as to exactly what form the next magical events would take. All she knew was that the underlying patterns on which the world was built, taken from other, older realities, would start to make themselves known. As weeks passed since the last monster waves were suppressed, some started to believe that the promised events would not come to pass.

That hope was first dashed in the historic Russian city of Kostroma. In a single moment, late in the morning, the entire city was sealed off in a dome. Investigation over the subsequent hours revealed that the dome was actually a sphere completely encapsulating the city. Forty-three hours after the sphere moved into place, it vanished revealing an interior vastly changed. Buildings had been remade, similar to their original forms but with new architectural styles and entirely new materials, rendering them alien in nature.

Like the Network, Cabal and EOA, Jason, Farrah and Dawn had travelled to Kostroma to investigate while the sphere was in place, keeping themselves low-profile. When the sphere dropped, they made their way inside.

"I've seen this kind of construction before," Farrah said as they rode into the affected area on black motorcycles, using Jason's party interface to communicate. "Not the architecture, but magical construction methods were used to create these buildings."

"They don't look new," Jason observed. "There's weathering. Years of it."

“That would appear to be the nature of the events,” Dawn said. “They remake the affected area in the image of worlds used as patterns when the original Builder created this universe.”

“What about the people?” Jason asked.

It didn’t take long to find out, for them or the other people streaming into the city. Russian authorities had sealed off the area around the sphere but had chosen not to obstruct any of the magical factions. As for Jason and his companions, they had no trouble circumventing the restrictions. What they found as they immediately encountered people was that the residents were no longer human. People were getting up from where they had apparently fallen unconscious, out on the street or in their cars. It had apparently happened quickly enough to cause traffic accidents.

"Is that a leonid?" Jason asked, looking at a huge, hairy, lion-like woman.

As they saw more and more people, Jason realised they had been transformed from human to entirely different humanoid species. They spotted elves and the dark-skinned runic people, with their tattoo-like rune markings that faintly glowed. They saw most of the species from Farrah's world and more besides, although most of the people had turned into leonids. As the recovering residents realised what had happened to them, they started to panic.

"I had been uncertain as to what would happen to the people," Dawn said. "I had feared they would die if caught up in the changes. This is drastic but better than death."

“Is there any way to undo this?” Jason asked. “Maybe with the magic door?”

“I’m sorry,” Dawn said. “You could no more undo this than unscramble an egg.”

“Then it’s time to go,” Jason said. “If we run into anyone from the magic factions it will just cause problems. If we can’t help these people, we can at least avoid making it worse.”

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Flying back toward Australia, Jason rubbed his forehead as he sat, his expression dark.

“This is a disaster,” he said. “I can’t even begin to parse the ramifications. We already treat other ethnicities so poorly and now this? It’s going to be a horror show.”

“They were all essence-capable species, like humans,” Dawn said. “None have high levels of inherent magic. I suspect any magical entities in the city were unaffected, be they essence-users, Cabal or modified EOA members. They were likely rendered unconscious with the rest, though.”

“I recognised some of those races from my world,” Farrah said. “Not all of them, though.”



“It looked like the pattern expressed by the event was taken from a leonid-dominant area,” Dawn said.

“What about animals?” Jason asked. “I didn’t spot any but there has to have been cats and dogs and birds. How many rats are in a city?”

“It is likely that some, if not all of the animals were also affected,” Dawn said. “They will be unlikely to pose a threat, however. They will likely be transmogrified into creatures of similar ecological niche and magical power.”

“I even saw draconians,” Farrah said. “They’re pretty rare on my world. I didn’t see any celestines, though.”

“Probably due to the unusual origin of the celestine species,” Dawn said.

“Unusual origin?” Jason asked. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“Me either,” Farrah said.

“A little ironic, given that should the two of you were to breed, a celestine would be the result. An outworlder breeding with another species will produce offspring of that species. Should two outworlders have a child, the result is a celestine. Of course, celestines can have more children with their own kind, which is how celestines propagate. I, myself am a product of two outworlder parents.”

“It’s kind of a shame people aren’t turning into celestines,” Jason said. “If everyone was turning into elves and celestines, there’d be a lot less trouble. Not none, but people would be less prejudicial to a bunch of attractive people.”

“It will make an interesting change to the magical landscape if they start getting essences,” Farrah said. “Other races mean other abilities.”

Jason lifted his head, wide-eyed.

“Shade,” he said, “Can you please make a video call to Anna Tilden?”

Moments later, Jason was looking at Anna’s face on a wall monitor.

“I didn’t expect to hear from you anytime soon, Mr Asano.”

“I know you’re a long way from Russia, Anna,” Jason said, “but I assume you’re being kept in the loop.”

“People turning into some kind of monsters,” Anna said. “Information is sporadic, this early. Are you there?”

“We were. They aren’t turning into monsters, Anna. They’re turning into other species. Species that can use essences to awaken powers; usually different from those that humans do.”

Anna sat up straight behind her desk.

"I thought that might get your attention," Jason said. "Those people will be incredibly valuable to the Network."

"Why would you tell me this?"

"So you have a chance to control the narrative. If the Network sees their value, those people are less likely to be rounded up into camps. If the Network gives enough of them power, it'll be harder to persecute the rest."

"I don't have the influence to make that kind of thing happen."

"But you have the voice to make yourself heard. If it works out, maybe that influence will come."

Anna nodded.

"I can try. Thank you, Asano."

## Chapter 384

### You Shouldn't Lie to Your Wife

With the monster waves gone, recovery efforts were underway. The death toll continued to grow as the full depth of the monster wave catastrophe was assessed, blowing past early estimates to cross the two million mark as abandoned rural areas were once more made accessible.

Stalled distribution lines for food and other necessities were opening up again, complicated by a global economy more ravaged than the global populace. Calls for unprecedented social welfare programs were being enacted immediately in some areas and determinedly opposed in others. In the United States, such proposals were the latest battle line in a growing culture war, with claims of socialist takeovers driving massive protests against proposed aid programs.

There was no shortage of people calling for such programs to be enacted, though, leading to open clashes between protesters. While the cities had been relatively safe, they had all suffered some level of overcrowding and food shortage.

In the midst of recovering from an unprecedented global disaster came the events in Kostroma, with more locations following after. Although the magical factions between them did a solid job of controlling the media, once footage started spilling onto the internet, the media companies started jumping in with both feet, airing constant footage of people and places transformed.

In the weeks following Kostroma, none of the handful of subsequently affected sites around the world were as large. A small town in the United States; an almost uninhabited stretch of land in Africa. A section of Alaska that was uninhabited except for wildlife. These places were much easier to contain, the magical factions doing a much better job of keeping the media out and their response hidden.

There was no warning of a transformation event and no escape once the sphere locked in. Once people realised that there was no way to protect themselves from the transformation, new waves of unrest began. Reactions to the transformed, as they quickly became known, varied widely, from the accepting to the violent. A staging site outside of Kostroma processing the affected residents was attacked by a violent mob, with the Russian government denying involvement, despite a failure to crack down on the activity.

In the midst of this came the first footage of the magical factions in open conflict. As Dawn had predicted, a single reality core appeared in each of the affected zones and the factions immediately scrambled after it.

Part of this was Jason's doing. His conversation with Anna, as predicted, had proliferated wildly. What was a closely-held secret about the spoils of the transformation events became open knowledge to every EOA cell, Network branch and Cabal group. With category four power on the table and the competition fierce, all pretence was dropped in pursuit of the reality cores.

Reality cores were roughly the size and shape of an ostrich egg, glowing with transcendent light. The Cabal claimed the ones in Kostroma and Africa, the Network the one in the USA.

As fifth, sixth and seventh locations became affected, it was harder to keep track of who was claiming what from the outside. Despite Jason and his companions never participating, Jason and Asya followed events closely. Itsuki, arriving at Jason's house in the village, found them watching yet another news report.

"If we aren't getting involved," Itsuki asked them, "then why is all this so important?"

"It's about the balance of power," Asya explained. "One faction gaining too much strength could easily lead it either dominating or being allied against by the others. Skirmishes over specific objectives could deteriorate into outright magical war."

The second major population centre to be affected was Pudong, China. It was transformed into a crystal city filled with people who mostly turned into an earth-affinity species with gemstone-like scales covering their bodies. Neither Jason nor Farrah had seen the species before, although Dawn was familiar with them. Much larger than Kostroma, millions of people were affected in Pudong and international groups were already voicing concerns about the Chinese response.

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While the Network leadership caught up in competing for reality cores, the rank and file were refocused on their long-held duty of intercepting dimensional incursions before they became monster waves. This duty, however, came with some unexpected changes.

Rebooting the dimensional detection grid had apparently activated previously unknown elements, namely, grid coverage of the oceans. As if the systems had been there, waiting and dormant all along, suddenly underwater dimensional incursions were detectable.

Given the surface area of the Earth, the Network had always estimated that two-thirds of dimensional incursions went unchecked, with monster waves appearing in the unseen depths. When the monsters had been category two, living and dying in the ocean depths, the Network had only ever dealt with the occasional category three that lasted much longer and sometimes became a threat to shipping. Now that category three monsters were

emerging more frequently as category four incursions increasingly took place, the network was forced to respond.

In the short term, monster surges were often being allowed to take place. This was not a change from before the underwater grid activated and getting the resources to fight category-four monsters underwater was tricky. When it wasn't possible, the monsters were allowed to emerge so the low magic would choke the category fours and the rest could be cleaned up by difficult but manageable operations.

Stockpiled essences that offered any help were broken out and assigned to new trainees in a recruitment storm made possible by the network's now public operations. Water essences had always been useful and were in short supply but there was a large stock of aquatic essences that were previously unvalued. More promising recruits were given more desirable essences like shark, turtle and octopus, while less appealing ones like coral and manatee went to those filling out the numbers in a crisis.

New recruits could only help down the line, though, even being rushed through accelerated training programs. The Network needed new infrastructure, logistics and protocols, but most of all, more warm bodies to cover what was suddenly a tripled number of incidents. Part of this was supplied by Network personnel ousted from countries like Iran and Venezuela.

Thus far, the EOA had managed to keep up with the challenge, now that they had claimed the Network's role in those regions, although how long that would last was an open question. Surprisingly, they were much more prepared than the Network for underwater operations, as if somehow they had known what was coming beforehand.

The open nature of the magical threat and the fresh memory of the monster waves also made it much easier for nations to fund and mobilise support, be it for the Network, the EOA or the Cabal, who were still working with the Network in many areas. In Africa, especially, the Network and the Cabal were in defiance of the conflict between their organisations as they continued to work together in relative harmony. Only the appearance of reality cores brought about any discord, although, for the moment, the cooperation was holding.

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Although it required more tweaking than Farrah had wanted, she finally completed a design for a grid detection system that Jason's cloud constructs were able to replicate. Jason decided that was a good time to leave Asano Village behind, protecting it by having no high-value targets present.

He considered taking his mother, concerned someone might see her as a potential hostage, but anyone who went to the trouble would certainly know beforehand of their estrangement. There were definitely spies amongst the residents, including Kaito and Amy. Both had been approached to spy on Jason by people who understood their fraught history. Both had the presence of mind to accept the generous offers, while immediately telling Jason so he could feed disinformation.

Kaito was coming with Jason as part of his support team, while Amy was remaining behind to administer the village and watch over their children. They said their goodbyes to one another away from Jason, although they knew that his senses picked up everything in the village.

“It’s creepy knowing that he’s kind of watching us right now,” Amy said to her husband as they embraced outside their eldest daughter’s bedroom. “He told me that he wasn’t the person I knew anymore and he was right. He’s almost alien.”

“He can only sense our auras, and only if he’s paying attention,” Kaito assured her.

“So he says,” Amy countered. “The truth is that we don’t know what he’s capable of. You and I both have magic, now, but can you do anything like the things he does? He turned into a bird made of outer space. He used those butterflies to wipe out whole sections of a city. Yes, they were those awful undead things, but what if they weren’t? What if he starts doing that to regular people?”

“People have had power like that long before Jason came along. The whole Cold War was a bunch of people playing chicken with nuclear annihilation.”

“But it’s Jason, Kai. I still know him well enough to realise how wrong it could go. He’s rash and impulsive. He gets caught up in ideas and stops looking at the consequences, without generals or launch codes or anything else to stop him.”

“We have to trust him, Ames.”

“Do we?”

“I’ve learned enough about all this to know that yes, we do.”

“There was a time I relied on him more than anyone,” Amy said. “I don’t think I can go back to that.”

“Let me do that. You just concentrate on looking after the people here.”

“You just make sure you come back to me. You have two little princesses that will be waiting for you.”

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In the city of Bregenz, Austria, a Network team had sealed off the road running up past Sacred Heart Church, along with the church itself and the surrounding area. The

Commander of Tactical Operations was named Franz, who watched as the ritualist team worked on opening the aperture that had appeared. The tactical teams were ready to move in; one nine-person section of category threes and two sections of category-twos, each led by a category three. There was also a military contingent, armed with magical firearms.

Franz was glad not to have been assigned to the response teams put together for the transformation events. Working for the Network gave him a sense of purpose and he was much more interested in protecting people by fighting monsters than chasing after power by fighting people. Despite having plateaued at category three, he had no ambitions to rise higher.

Few people could even dream of the lifespan and power that Franz already enjoyed. Since magic had come out in the open and his status was no longer a secret, even his mother-in-law had stopped telling his wife she could do better.

Franz knew that many of the Network's tactical members were annoyed at being left out of the hot new action, but he knew them to be fools. It wasn't like participating meant anyone involved would get a taste of whatever power the higher-ups deigned to let trickle down. More likely was that even if one of the events did take place in Austria, what waited for them was death.

It wasn't monsters they would be facing at they fought over reality cores. The so-called superheroes of the EOA weren't a grave threat but he had heard strange stories about the Cabal. Even worse, he'd heard about Network branches fighting one another, although any talk like that was quickly hushed up.

Franz was leading a team about to enter a dimensional incursion space, work he was more than happy to get back to after being sent to a series of little mountain towns littered with dead. One of his people pointed up and Franz used the telescopic vision of his perception power to spot a helicopter, high in the air. It rapidly descended but made oddly little noise. Franz's magical senses told him it was a category two conjured object.

The helicopter was large but sleek, with tinted glass making up a large portion of the fuselage. It dropped down to hover above the street, where more than two dozen guns were pointed at it. A side door opened, revealing a figure they all recognised.

With his blood-red robes and dark cloak, Jason Asano was a red lightsaber away from being the next disappointing Star Wars villain. He dropped lightly from the helicopter and walked over to Franz, somehow knowing that he was in charge.

Franz looked at the bright silver eyes in the otherwise impenetrable darkness of the hood. Jason then pushed the hood back off his head to reveal a face with sleek black hair

and the too-polished handsomeness of a category three. The man gave him a friendly smile.

"Hello, Franz. Can I call you Franz? I know there are standing orders not to let me into any dimensional spaces, but you know that's just the Network wanting me to haul off on one of their teams so I look bad in the press."

"You don't know what I think," Franz said.

"I don't? It's what you told Maria. You shouldn't lie to your wife, Franz."

"Are you threatening my family?"

"No, Franz. I just want you to know that I came here knowing exactly what I was walking into. If I have to go through someone, it'll be you, straight up."

"I appreciate that."

Franz looked at the others leaving the helicopter.

"You have four category threes, including yourself," Franz said. "I have twelve, including me. Are you confident with three-to-one odds, Mr Asano?"

"Actually, it'll just be me, so twelve-to-one odds. Also, yes. And call me Jason."

Franz looked at Jason, whose expression and body language was completely relaxed, except for the silver eyes locked onto Franz like sharp, pointed icicles. Franz relied on his aura senses to guide him in uncertain situations but he couldn't sense Jason at all. He couldn't read the other category threes behind Asano either, the one he guessed was Farrah Hurin was even using her aura to prevent him from reading the category twos. It was a skilful demonstration of aura control.

With Asano, who wasn't just hard to detect but a ghost to his magical senses, invisible to all but his eyes.

"Mr Asano, how do you see this going if I tell you no?"

"Franz, I'm asserting right now that I'm going to go through that aperture and that you can't stop me. Either you assume that I'm right and let me through, or don't and you'll find out for certain."

Franz looked into Jason's unflinching eyes again and slowly nodded.

"Alright, let them through," he announced.

"Boss, the standing orders are—"

"I know what the standing orders are. If this guy wants to clear some of the monsters for us, I'm going to let him. You don't like that, Baumgartner, feel free to try and stop him."

The hood crawled back over Jason's head on its own and Jason slowly turned to look at Baumgartner, his silver eyes seeming disembodied in the darkness of the hood. Baumgartner looked back nervously, frozen on the spot.



“I’d say that’s a no,” Franz said. “Any chance you could leave a guy some loot in there?”

“I think I can manage that,” Jason said. “You made a wise choice, Franz.”

Shade’s bodies emerged from the shadows of every one of Franz’s silver-rankers, including Franz himself. As Jason strode toward the aperture, the bodies returned to his own shadow in a swarm.

## Chapter 385

### The Decision Has Been Made

At Jason's request, Kaito didn't conjure a new helicopter on entering the proto-space. Farrah carried a device that she and Jason had built together to find the optimal spot within the proto-space for Jason to conduct his ritual and they would inevitably encounter monsters along the way. They viewed it as a chance to put the bronze-rankers on the team through their paces.

The extradimensional realm diverged heavily from the physical reality outside, the Austrian city replaced with a primordial jungle in which ancient ziggurats poked out of the canopy. The environment was sweltering with both heat and humidity.

"This air is hard to breathe," Kaito said. "It's heavy."

"My clothes are getting sticky," Itsuki said. "It may impair my mobility."

"You still sweat because you ranked up so quickly," Farrah told him. "You clearly focused strictly on advancing your essence abilities. You need to take the time for exercises that will help your body become more magical. I gave you the basics in training but you've clearly neglected them."

"Sorry Miss Hurin," Itsuki said, looking every inch the chastised schoolboy. The Asano sisters, Akari and Mei, watched him with amusement.

It was a silver-rank proto-space, so only the anchor monsters holding the space together and possibly a few others would be silver-rank. For this reason, Jason and the other silvers didn't engage, letting Kaito, Asya, Greg and Itsuki do the sweeping.

They each had their own motifs in their power sets, but Itsuki was the odd man out in more ways than one. The others heavily featured conjured tech in their power sets, which was common for Earth essence-users even without the technology essence. Itsuki's powers were more fantastical in nature. Added to the fact that the others had worked together before and were comfortable with one another, Itsuki literally and figuratively stood apart.

Of the four bronze-rankers, Kaito was the least comfortable due to operating outside of his helicopter. He was very much in the support vein but Jason and Farrah wanted him to experience less than ideal conditions. His vehicle essence powers were not useless without it, however, allowing him to conjure surveillance drones to scout for threats and gun drones to handle them.

Although she was a sniping specialist who favoured strong, singular long shots, Asya conjured a carbine rifle more suited to the closer confines of the jungle. It was a futuristic weapon with glowing blue bits, which Jason strongly approved of.

The person with the actual technology essence, Greg, was ironically the one calling up the most outmoded technology. He conjured an entire outfit from a version of the nineteenth century that only ever existed in pulp novels and old film serials. He had a long brown coat, vest and bowler hat with a pair of goggles slung around the brim. He had a backpack covered in loose flaps and the whole ensemble had enough pouches and pockets that it looked hard to walk in.

Greg also conjured a gun that looked like a replica from a fifties sci-fi movie but made of brass. Greg reached back to rummage through his backpack, pulling out a cable and plugging it onto the base of the strange gun's grip, causing it to hum with power.

Itsuki's powers were more classically magical. Although they shared the dark essence, Itsuki didn't have a cloak like Jason. Instead, he transformed himself into a semi-translucent figure, like a statue made of smoked glass. It made him much harder to sense, allowed him to blend into shadows and, as of bronze rank, made him semi-tangible. This reduced the effect of many attacks on him while also allowing him to go places he otherwise couldn't. So long as he moved slowly, he could pass right through barriers like cages or thorny bushes.

Itsuki was used to playing stealthy scout, much like Jason, which was a poor fit with the others. They already had Asya's enhanced perception from her master confluence and Kaito's drones, making Itsuki's potential contribution limited.

Itsuki had been startled and delighted to experience Jason's party interface, which had given him a whole new perspective on his own abilities. Shade had identified Itsuki's summoned familiar as a darklight ogre, which was a defensive combat familiar whose abilities compelled enemies to attack it while inflicting debuffs on any that did.

Using Magic Society records, Jason had identified the ability that summoned Itsuki's familiar and discovered that the familiar would gain new forms as Itsuki ranked up, eventually becoming something called an eclipse titan.

Once they started encountering monsters, Greg's gun was revealed to fire arcs of electricity that chained from one monster to the next. It did minimal damage but delivered a paralysing jolt, setting up monsters for follow-up attacks. A well-aimed burst of gunfire from Asya or a stream of heavy bullets from Kaito's gun drones finished the job, their smooth teamwork showing off their experience working together.

Jason and Farrah assessed the bronze-rankers as the team progressed towards the location for the ritual.

“Itsuki will have to work a little to find his path,” Jason assessed. “This isn’t a great team composition for him.”

“That’s good,” Farrah said. “His family has clearly been feeding him ideal scenarios to rank him up quickly. A little hardship will knock some unwanted sensibilities out of him.”

Itsuki slowly learned to adapt to his teammates, using stealth to approach monsters detected by the others and lay on afflictions. He was more of a team player than Jason, whose afflictions were damage-focused. Itsuki softened the enemies up with more debilitation effects than damage, luring enemies into kill boxes for the others before he vanished as the damage poured in.

Once the team reached the site for the ritual, they needed to clear the space for the largest magic diagram Jason had ever worked with. Kaito and Greg’s experience setting up landing zones came into play. Kaito used an ability from his soaring essence to launch himself into the air, at which point he conjured his helicopter around him. He then flipped it, the blades reconfiguring to maintain its hovering while upside down and descended the helicopter into the jungle canopy. As the rotor blades dropped into the trees, they worked as a giant saw, rapidly clearing the area. Kaito even moved the helicopter around, still upside down, to clear a wider area.

“I was once shot off the side of a mountain by a waterfall experiencing intermittent service failure,” Jason said, watching the upside-down helicopter-turned-power-saw. “I’ve come back from the dead, fought interdimensional dinosaurs and met my evil magic clone. Somehow, this is still the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever seen.”

“He’s very precise,” Akari’s sister Mei said. “You don’t see a lot of that in upside-down helicopters.”

Rather than dismiss his helicopter, Kaito cleared a secondary space in which to land it. While he was doing that, Greg swapped the cable running from his backpack to his gun for a hose, turning it into a flamethrower to clear the ground now littered in shredded trees, leaving behind nothing but charcoal and ash.

Kaito brought his helicopter back to blow away the burnt debris while Greg moved on to the second cleared space. In short order, the pair had cleared out two spaces, one for the ritual and one for the helicopter.

“You’ve got the logistics down,” Jason told Greg as Farrah used an earth-shaping power to flatten out the cleared ground, ready for the ritual.

"This is what we were doing while you were bludging, taking a gap year despite only having completed one semester of university a half-dozen years ago," Greg told him.

"That does sound pretty slack," Kaito agreed.

"I was helping earthquake victims and healing people with Ebola," Jason said. "And it was only half a year."

"That's what you told us you were doing," Greg said. "I bet you actually spent most of the time in a resort in Bermuda."

"What I told you? It was on the news."

"Because the EOA put it there," Farrah contributed, continuing to flatten out the ground. "There's no reason to suspect anything they're behind, right?"

The three Japanese members of the team, Akari, Mei and Itsuki looked on as the others continued to rib Jason.

"Are they always like this?" Mei asked her sister. "It seems very disrespectful."

"I believe it's an Australian cultural practice," Akari said. "You get used to it."

"Do you really?" Itsuki asked.

"Not really," Akari admitted. "They're all very strange."

"I thought Miss Hurin was from another universe, not Australia."

"She seems quite proficient at assimilating."

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Carrying out the ritual went smoothly. While Jason did so, with Farrah's assistance, the rest of the team patrolled a wide perimeter to keep any wandering monsters away. If the ambient magic was too badly stirred up, they would need to start over.

Greg's abilities were especially useful, as his power set focused on control and area denial. As such, he was given the largest area of ground to cover. Given time to set up, he conjured iron rods that ended in spheres, which he planted at regular intervals. They would make paralyzing electricity attacks, while automated turrets he emplaced behind them would follow up. Looking like gatling coil guns from the nineteenth century, they could rapidly shoot electrified nails.

When a large pack of iron-rank monsters appeared in his patrol area, Greg deployed a shaft from the top of his backpack. It sprouted helicopter blades, allowing him to swoop over the pack and strafe them with his flamethrower. Only a trio of the toughest monsters survived and Greg landed, at which point the rotor blades were flung from the shaft. Two of the monsters were killed while the third was outright decapitated.

After the ritual was complete, the team climbed into the helicopter and headed back for the aperture.

"A couple more rituals and we should be able to triangulate the first node I need to modify," Jason said. "As for how many nodes it will take in total, I have no idea. That means a lot of proto-spaces."

"Are people just going to let you us in, the way they did here?" Itsuki asked.

"No," Jason said. "We went to the extra effort here to make a point that we will be peaceful in our operations. Sooner or later, though, someone is going to take a hard stance."

"What happens then?" Itsuki asked.

"We hurt as few people as we can but we don't stop. The Network rank and file are just doing their jobs and don't seem interested in impeding us, at least until the people at the top start paying attention to anything but the transformation events."

"You think they'll eventually try and stop us?"

"Yes. Even if they don't realise it now, what we are doing will turn off the reality core spigot. If we're lucky, they won't twig until we're close to the end and the transformation events start slowing down. At that point, someone will definitely put it together. My concern is that someone clearly knew more about what's going on than is good for us. We may start meeting real opposition much earlier."

"And then we fight?" Itsuki asked.

"Not if we can avoid it," Jason said. "We can't fight the whole Network."

Itsuki nodded.

"That task force we met outside the aperture," he said. "Are you really strong enough to take on twelve category threes alone?"

"Of course not; it was all bluff. Well, mostly bluff. I mean, I'd have to cheat, certainly. Probably."

"It's a matter of training," Farrah interjected. "Those men were traditional essence users from this world. Their training is all about group tactics for monster elimination, not intelligent, singular enemies with a wide variety of powers. They aren't ready for someone who fights like Jason."

"Basically, they're specced for PvE, not PvP," Jason said. "Once Farrah and I return to her world, I won't be able to swagger around like that. I'm making hay while the sun shines."

“I imagine he’ll swagger about anyway,” Farrah said. “He’s just going to get slapped down when he does.”

\*\*\*

Things were tense when Jason and his companions returned to the aperture but they were allowed to depart unchallenged. Soon after, Kaito’s helicopter landed next to a tour bus on an isolated stretch of road near the Czech border. Kaito dismissed the helicopter and they piled into the tour bus, which was a luxurious, twin-level cloud coach on the inside.

“Were there problems with the Network?” Dawn asked by way of greeting as they arrived.

“No,” Jason said, falling into a soft cloud chair. “The extra legwork seems to have done the trick. This time.”

“Now that we are in the right region,” Dawn said, “you can ideally utilise Kaito to beat the local branches to new apertures. Did you take notes?”

“I did,” Jason said.

“Good. Hopefully, the results of these rituals help us refine exactly which nodes we are looking for. Until we get more data, we can't even be certain we're after the right nodes.”

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An attention-getting supercar drove through the town of Conrad, Montana, making its way to an oilseed refinery on the outskirts. It parked in front of the administration building and a man in a sharp suit named Emerson Cleary stepped out, bringing a briefcase from the passenger seat with him. He took a small box that barely fit from the vehicle’s meagre trunk space and carried it inside, holding it by the handle on top.

The office was a cheap but functional prefab affair, with a middle-aged receptionist talking on the phone. Cleary sat the box on the desk and pressed his finger on the phone cradle, hanging up the call.

“Excuse me?” the receptionist asked indignantly as she gave him an unfriendly look up and down, before looking out the window at his car. “Who exactly do you think you are?”

“Where can I find Mr Tallman?” Cleary asked.

“I’d asked if you checked the shop where they sell manners, but clearly not,” she said.

The office manager hurried in from the back, his body language obsequious.

“I’m sorry, Sir, I’ll take you to the special projects building at once.”

"I haven't logged him in as a visitor, yet," the receptionist said and the manager turned on her.

"I swear to God, Janet, if I find a single record of this man ever having been here you will be unemployed by the end of the day. You are not to so much as breathe a word of this to anyone."

"If you look in the parking lot, Darren," she said, "You'll see thirty or so dusty trucks and one shiny, red mid-life crisis. I think people might notice."

"Shut up, Janet! Can I take your briefcase or your box, Sir?"

"Reach for that box, Darren," Cleary said, "and you and Janet will both be dead before your hand gets there."

Darren went pale.

"This way, please, Sir. May I ask your name?"

"Probably best that you didn't, Darren."

None of the employees ever went into the special projects building, which was a small brick hut in a corner of the industrial lot with no signage. Darren hovered curiously as Cleary stood at the door until Cleary glared at him and he skittered away. Cleary went inside, where he stepped into the silent elevator and descended deep into the Earth.

When the elevator reached the bottom floor, Cleary walked down a corridor with lights that lit up at his approach and dimmed once more behind him. Eventually, he reached a circular room with several doors. One of them opened and a pasty-faced man appeared.

"Deputy Director Cleary," he greeted, although his eyes were locked on the box. "That's it?"

"This is it," Cleary confirmed.

"I would have thought they would send more security."

"They did," Cleary said. "You just haven't seen them."

"I see. This way, please."

The man opened a door and led Cleary through. After walking down another hallway they reached a second door, beyond which was a large room, mostly empty. There was a table and chair, but what drew the eye was a pair of large cylinders, situated in the middle of elaborate magical circles. The cylinders were filled with milky liquid and what appeared to be human forms could just be made out through the white murk.

"So this is them," Cleary said.

"Yes. I need written confirmation of the orders before we can move forward."



Cleary set the box and his briefcase on the table and opened the briefcase. He took out a folder and handed it to the other man, who started looking through it. As he did, Cleary opened the box, revealing an object the size of an ostrich egg, shining with transcendent light.

“Are we waking up both?” the pasty man asked.

“Just one, until we secure a larger supply.”

“Very well. When do we start?”

“Immediately,” Cleary said. “The decision has been made to bring Jason Asano’s project under our control.”

## Chapter 386

### First Priority

In Switzerland, the resort town of Interlaken and the lakeshore villages around Lake Brienz had been evacuated during the monster waves. Determined an insufficiently populous area to warrant its own safe zone, the locals had been sent to the closest established safe zone, in the city of Thun.

A month after the last monster wave, people were cleared to return to their homes. Buses started shipping residents back to their villages, where they would be left to assess the damages. There was a lot of destruction, as the evacuations had been done promptly but the scent of people had been left behind. Monsters denied their prey had taken their frustrations out on the buildings.

The act of god claim made by insurance companies was currently under attack from around the world, on multiple fronts. In the wake of the monster waves and now the transformation events, many countries were already ramrodding legislation to render the claim invalid, along with a barrage of lawsuits. No few of them were attacking the act of god claim on the grounds that with magic at large in the world, although such grounds were not considered to have a high chance of success.

For the immediacy, none of these events helped the people on the buses moving around Lake Brienz. In one of them, a passenger pointed out an isolated building by the lakeshore that seemed untouched.

“Was that large chalet there before?” she asked her husband.

“Of course it was,” he said. “You think someone came here and built a chalet with monsters running around everywhere?”

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Inside what looked like a chalet in the Swiss alps, Jason languidly stretched out in a cloud bed, Asya moulding herself to his body almost as well as the cloud-stuff the bed was made of.

“If I didn’t have to go fight evil,” he said contentedly, “I could stay like this for a long, long time.”

“Lazy,” Asya teased, kissing his neck. “Since we will, eventually, have to get out of this bed, there’s something I’d like to talk to you about. Something important.”

“Is it the hot chocolate?” Jason asked. “Shade promised to stop letting Colin help anymore. He means well but doesn’t understand that not everyone needs that much protein in their diet.”

“No,” she giggled, a tinkling water sound. “I’m talking about when you leave. For the other world.”

“Oh?”

“I know you’re taking your sister and her family by stashing them in your spirit vault. I want to go with you.”

“Ah,” he said. “Please tell me I’m not the reason you’re asking.”

“I like you quite a lot, Asano, but not enough to leave my family and everything I’ve ever known. I want to go to the other world because it’s another world. A whole new universe, full of magic and miracles. Literal miracles.”

“That’s true,” Jason said thoughtfully. “You can just hang around in the local worship square for a bit and some god will show up and do something flashy.”

“I want to see things that aren’t possible here. To do things that almost no one from our world has ever done.”

“I see,” Jason said with a grin. “Magic and wonders. That is a good reason.”

“So you’ll take me with you?”

Jason could feel her anxiousness in both her body and aura as she waited for his reply.

“I’ll tell you what I told Erika,” he said. “There’s still time until I go back. Think it over. Ask me any questions that come up. We can talk about it again when the time comes and as many times as you like before that.”

“Is that a provisional yes?”

“It’s provisional yes,” he confirmed with a chuckle. He felt her body move next to his as her tension melted away and he pressed his lips to hers.

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The Los Angeles Network branch’s plane was no small private jet but a full-sized plane the size of a passenger jet. Based off a corporate jet variant of a passenger liner, it was build to include magic from the frame out and could serve as a mobile command post for Network operations. Amenities included the shower facility from which Jack Gerling emerged, rubbing his bushy beard unhappily.

“That gunk doesn’t come out easily,” he growled like a bear. With his towering bulk and hirsute body, he didn’t just sound like a bear but also looked like one.

The other Network members on the plane looked at the brutish man with trepidation. Even disregarding magic, he looked like he had shambled out of the woods in search of food. Once magic was taken into account, it became even worse.

The US branches of the Network had been pooling resources for years, giving up enough monster cores to raise countless essence users to category three. Finally, they managed to get two people across the threshold of category four. Jack Gerling was one of those chosen, due to his rare and powerful essences.

His might essence was common but no one would complain at its inclusion. His potent essence was extremely rare and the vast essence was so unheard of that they had to go through records hundreds of years old to identify it. The result was the onslaught essence and Gerling's powers turned him into a walking bomb. Now that he was category four, he could down the plane he was on and everyone in it with no more effort than it took to snap his fingers. This fact was not lost on the Network staffers currently onboard.

One of the network staffers approached Gerling.

"Sir, Deputy Director Cleary has asked that you join him for a meal."

Gerling scowled.

"What kind of meal?"

"His exact words were 'an ass-load of fried chicken and hot sauce,' sir."

"Yeah? I like the sound of that."

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Greg stepped onto the upper-floor balcony of the chalet. His hands were wrapped around a mug of hot chocolate, warming them against the crisp morning air. His bronze-rank body could easily endure the cold but he still enjoyed the comfort of its warmth. He moved next to Jason, standing at the balcony to take in the view of the lake.

"See the village across the lake?" Jason asked. "It's empty."

"Evacuated?" Greg asked.

"Yeah. They're coming back, though, even as we speak."

"Maybe that means the world had turned a corner from the monster waves."

"I hope so," Jason agreed. "If we can shut down these transformation events, it really will have. I'm so tired of dark days, but at least we have the power to do something about it. Most people are stuck hoping that people like us will get it done."

"Not a good time to feel powerless."

"No," Jason said. "My first night, in the other world, my friend Rufus told me that I had a choice. I could let other people protect me or take the power to control my own fate."

"Meaning essences."

"Yes. There's a responsibility that comes with that, though. When the bad things happen, we have to stand between them and everyone else."

"I'm not sure everyone sees it that way."

“Rufus does,” Jason said. “He carries it around like a weight. I try to follow that example.”

“I know. Farrah says you shouldn’t.”

“Farrah doesn’t lead,” Jason said. “She’s smarter than anyone on her own team and she’s smarter than me but she doesn’t lead. I’m responsible for all of you and she’s smart enough to avoid carrying that. She might tell us to let go of that burden but she knows we won’t. She just wants us to not carry so much of it that we break.”

They stood in silence for a long time, looking out through the pristine air. Greg didn’t drink from his mug, letting it sit on the railing, nestled warmly between his hands.

“Was it on the news?” he asked Jason.

“Was what on the news?”

“That people are bussing back into the local villages.”

“I can feel them. Buses full people, working their way around the lake. Auras full of hope and trepidation. Uncertain of what they’ll find but yearning for home.”

Greg panned his gaze around the lake, not spotting any movement. If there were busloads of people out there, he couldn’t see them.

“You can sense them from here?”

“Yes.”

Greg looked at Jason, frowning.

“You’re worried about me,” Jason said, smiling as he continued to look out over the lake.

“Sometimes I wonder if you’re getting a little too far from human, Jason.”

“I’m not human.”

“I don’t mean human as a species,” Greg said. “I mean the experience of being a human.”

“Same answer. I’m not a human. If I keep looking at the world as if I were, I’m not sure I can do the things I need to. I hope Makassar is the worst thing I ever experience but I have to assume it won’t be. I need to be able to handle the next thing, and the thing after that.”

“So you just become detached from everything?”

“No,” Jason said, turning to his friend with a smile. “I just pick my attachments carefully. I’ve seen what I’ll become if I don’t have them. As time goes by, I’ve been missing my friends in the other world more and more. I’m starting to realise that monsters aren’t the only things we’re meant to protect each other from.”

Greg looked down into his steaming mug.

“Stopping you from turning into a spooky murder machine is a lot of responsibility,” he said.

“You should try needing to save the world.”

“Oh, please,” Greg scoffed. “A drama queen like you? You’re loving it.”

Jason let out an affronted laugh.

“Is that how it is?”

“You know it is,” Greg said with a grin then sipped at his hot chocolate, before spitting it over the balcony and peering into his mug.

“What is in this? Is that beef stock?”

“I apologise,” Shade said, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “It seems I had not excised all the cocoa that Colin supplemented after all. I shall fetch you a fresh cup.”

“Thank you,” Greg said, still making a face as Shade floated away with the cup. “Am I imagining things, or is Shade getting quite butlery?”

“He’s become fascinated by the profession,” Jason said. “He likes the quiet, dignified competence of duty. It hasn’t made trying to get him to be more relaxed any easier.”

“You always try and turn everyone into you,” Greg said. “Maybe instead of trying to pull everyone into your pace, you should appreciate them for what they have to offer the way they are. If Shade wants to be Alfred to your Batman, let him.”

“I wish I had a secret cave lair. Behind a waterfall.”

“We’re standing in your magical, shape-changing, chalet that turns into a hovercraft tour bus. There was also mention of turning it into a palace?”

“Haven’t tried that, yet. I’ve never actually needed a palace for anything.”

“No one has ever needed a palace, Jason. They just wanted a lot of golden sconces more than they wanted poor people to have food.”

“Still a dirty socialist, then?”

“Aren’t you?”

“I’m not sure how many princes and wealthy aristocrats you can make friends with before it becomes hypocritical. It’s not really a hovercraft, by the way.”

“What?”

“The tour bus from the cloud flask makes. It’s not really a hovercraft. Now that it’s silver-rank, it could actually fly if the magic here wasn’t so thin. It’ll have to wait until I go back to Farrah’s world.”

Jason felt a nervous tremulation in Greg’s aura. Jason waited for his friend to speak.

“So, ah, has Asya talked to you yet?” Greg asked.

“About going to the other world?”

“Yeah.”

“She has. Have you both been working up to ask me?”

“We figured one of us should soften you up by sleeping with you first,” Greg said. “I won’t lie: I’m glad she volunteered.”

Jason burst out laughing.

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“And he’s president?” Gerling asked as he tossed the bone from a drumstick into the large bin Cleary had made sure was on hand.

“Yes,” Cleary said, then bit into a chicken wing. Cleary had replaced his suit with a more casual shirt and pants before joining Gerling in a fried chicken dinner, although Gerling was consuming the bulk of the piled tray.

“The TV guy?” Gerling asked, grabbing another piece.

“Yes.”

“That’s our country you’re talking about?”

“Yes.”

“And he beat Bill Clinton? I bet Hillary would find it weird being back in the White House without being president. I thought they’d get divorced after she was impeached over the intern sex thing.”

“The nineties were a simpler time,” Cleary said.

“You’re alright, Cleary,” Gerling said as Cleary tossed his own chicken bone into the bin. “I appreciate you sitting down and eating with me. My last handler would have thrown me the chicken like I was a monster in a pit. Most people are scared of me.”

“Oh, I’m definitely scared of you,” Cleary said. “I won’t lie to you, Mr Gerling: my job is to make you as amenable as possible to the requests of my superiors. What that means is if you want something, my job is to get it for you, as close to the way you want it as is practically possible. I think keeping things friendly between you and I will make it a better experience for both of us, and if that means eating some delicious fried chicken, I’m willing to take that hit.”

“Good to hear,” Gerling said with a bellowing laugh. “The last guy was a little too much stick and not enough carrot.”

After years of working to get a pair of category four essence users, the US Network branches discovered an unhappy reality: without a supply of gold spirit coins, they would be power-starved, rapidly weaken and possibly die. The Network researchers managed to place both men in magical stasis, itself quite resource hungry, forestalling their demise.

The supply of gold spirit coins was exceptionally small, meaning the category fours could only be temporarily revived for critical missions where overwhelming force was required. It also meant that, despite their world-beating power, the category fours were beholden to whoever could provide the coins to keep them alive. Gerling's previous handler had enthusiastically waved that sword of Damocles, forgetting that it was a lot easier to replace a handler than a category four essence user.

"Things are different, now," Cleary said. "These new reality cores not only mean that we can keep you out of stasis but that we should be able to add more category fours to the roster."

"And you pulled me out to fight for them?"

"Yes. The Cabal is slowly-but-surely gaining an advantage in these transformation spaces. They seem to have some kind of connection to them, which our researchers suspect is related to the origins of the cabal's various factions."

"Bunch of creepy weirdos," Gerling said. "I don't mind kicking their asses back and forth a little."

"We aren't actually certain how effective the reality cores will be in enhancing their power," Cleary said. "We have people looking into it, obviously. We estimate that our essence users will get stronger using cores faster than they will. Reality core power can be directly consumed with a simple ritual, like a supercharged monster core gobstopper. If the Cabal can leverage them effectively, though, we may need to initiate large scale interdiction before they become too powerful."

"Large scale interdiction?"

"War, Mr Gerling."

"Well, damn; count me in. I'm the most powerful thing on this whole goddamn planet, so let me loose."

"That's far from our ideal scenario and, for now, we aren't even pitting you against the Cabal."

"That's not the first priority?" Gerling asked. "If they're sending me, that usually means it's the first priority."

"There is, potentially, an additional source for the reality cores. One that will produce them faster, more reliably and, best of all, exclusively. It might even be possible to shut down the transformation events and leave us with the sole means to reach the highest levels of power in the world."

"That sounds just dandy," Gerling said.



“Yes it does,” Cleary agreed. “We can stop pretending the International Committee has any purpose other than doing what we say, that the governments of the world work with us instead of for us and that the other magical factions have any reason to exist at all.”

“Well, damn,” Gerling said. “We’re looking to take over the damn planet?”

“We already have, Mr Gerling. The goal is to reach the point where we can stop pretending we haven’t.”

## Chapter 387

### Node Space

The Network team from the Potsdam branch reached the aperture on Babelsberg Park and found it already open. The residue of the ritual used to open it was on the ground and in front of it was a Japanese woman with a category three aura, meditating with her eyes closed.

As trucks and helicopters arrived she gave no reaction, remaining cross-legged on the grass until the Operations Commander approached her and she opened her eyes, dexterously rising to her feet by uncrossing her legs.

“Who are you?” the commander asked.

“Asano Akari.”

“Asano? As in...?”

“Yes. He asked me to stay here to prevent children from wandering in. I’m sure you can take care of that, now.”

She turned to enter the aperture but the commander called out to her.

“Miss Asano.”

She turned back.

“Our people are tracking you by the proto-spaces you’re visiting. There are a lot of Americans and International Committee people around, talking to our high-ups. I don’t know what they have planned, but tell him.”

“Why tell me this?” she asked.

“There are people that don’t like the way the Network has treated him. A lot of people. I was sent to Makassar, both times. I saw him going places no one else could go, saving people we had all written off. Days of it. Never stopping, never resting. He drives himself like a workhorse and then we turn on him? A lot of us think that isn’t right.”

Akari stared at the man and then gave a slight nod.

“I will relay your words to him. I know they will mean a lot.”

Akari moved to the aperture and stepped through.

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Cleary and Jack Gerling were in a hospitality suite at the Network’s Berlin branch.

“You’ve reviewed the briefing materials on what we know of Asano’s abilities?” Cleary asked.

“Such as they are,” Gerling said. “Too many holes, damn stealth types. He’s got a lot of escape options. You have no idea what that power where he turns into a bird is about?”

"We don't. We anticipate that you will be able to handle most of his methods through simple power disparity."

"His aura is really as strong as all that?"

"We estimate its strength to be somewhere in the range of what would normally be the zenith of category three. Added to his superior control, we strongly recommend against aura conflict. You should focus on areas in which your superiority is clear. Power, speed, strength. Direct confrontation. The two largest threats to that are if he escapes through ordinary evasion or his portal ability."

"You have countermeasures?" Gerling asked.

"We do, and we plan to catch him coming out of a dimensional space. We've been tracking his patterns. He's been going into a series of incursion spaces, using his team to keep monsters clear of his location while he conducts a large ritual in each."

"What's he doing?"

"We think he is trying to stop the transformation events."

"I want to see one," Gerling said. "People turning into elves and rock people and whatever. Can you get me an elf?"

"Yes," Cleary said. "Just one?"

Gerling laughed.

"One will do for now. Can't get too distracted on the job."

"I appreciate that. Asano's pattern is to enter multiple incursion spaces, perform his ritual and then move on. First Austria, then Switzerland and now Germany," Cleary said. "He's been responding quickly, entering spaces before our people get there, in most cases."

"Why don't our people stop him?"

"He and his companion, Farrah Hurin, have a lot of goodwill amongst the rank and file. They're role models to our younger people. Asano has used interviews to characterise himself as a symbol and credit our personnel as the true protectors of the planet. Given the way that the upper echelons of the Network have been pushing the lower over the last year, it inclines them to give Asano leeway."

"Meaning they won't stop him unless we ride them."

"There have been some who diligently attempted to stop him. After a series of brief altercations with Farrah Hurin, no one else made the attempt."

"Not Asano himself?"

“Asano claims that he is unable to stop his powers once they affect a person. It could be a lie and he doesn’t attack our people to maintain it. It could be genuinely true and he wants to avoid killing our people to maintain their goodwill.”

“I have trouble believing that one woman could beat a whole section of category threes.”

“I believe it was more that she made some quick examples and the rest were reluctant, given that she was just one of four category-threes in their group. The Japanese sisters are largely unknown but all our people have seen what Jason Asano does to the things he fights. The news played the footage of him killing that category four monster in Makassar on a loop. The most powerful monster ever to set foot on Earth and it looked like he tossed it through a wood-chipper. No one wants to end up like that.”

“That was when Asano used that power to turn into some kind of magic bird,” Gerling said. “The briefing notes had nothing about what that power was.”

“We don’t know,” Cleary said. “There are too many unknowns about him, which is why we brought you here. Nothing solves a problem as well as true power.”

\*\*\*

Having finally isolated what they hoped was the first node Jason needed to modify to repair the link, Jason and his team returned to Austria. Kaito’s helicopter set down in the Ziller Valley, in an isolated and open space close to the river. Accompanying Jason was the whole group; Dawn, Farrah and the Asano sisters, along with Greg, Asya, Itsuki and Kaito.

Kaito left his helicopter parked on the grass, ready for everyone to jump in at need. The others would remain while Jason entered alone, for the simple reason that only he could enter the space where the node could be modified. He had experimented with node spaces in preparation, opening the door to acclimatise to the conditions without making any changes.

Only Jason and Farrah were able to enter a node space once Jason opened the door. This was a result of their astral affinity, the mechanism preventing non-outworlders from using the door. Farrah could only withstand conditions within the node space for a limited time due to the corrosive aura it contained. Jason was able to withstand it but Farrah’s aura was ground down, after which the space started to have a deleterious effect on her body. For this reason, only Jason was going to go in, while the others would wait outside.

“It will take you time to understand what you are seeing in there,” Dawn advised Jason. “I have pushed as much theory into your head as I can but knowing the theory is

not the same as applying it. Take as long as you need to be certain of every change you make. What you are about to do is outside even my experience.”

Jason solemnly nodded and began opening the portal. He ran a hand over the ground and a line of silver light appeared running along it. From the line rose an arch of smoky glass with blue, silver and gold light twinkling within, the new material from which his portal arches were made. Instead of filling with the familiar dark void, though, it filled with a sheet of silver light. A powerful aura spilled from it and, except for Dawn and Farrah, Jason's companions all took an involuntary step back.

"See you soon," Jason said and then stepped through the door.

\*\*\*

“What kind of anomaly?” Cleary asked. He was in the Berlin branch’s grid monitoring station, hovering over the chair of an operator.

“At first I thought it was the start of a transformation event,” the operator explained nervously. “Then I realised it was too small. Much too small, as in, not much bigger than a person.”

“Where a normal transformation event is the size of a city,” Cleary said and patted the operator on the shoulder. “You did well to bring this to my attention quickly.”

Cleary left the monitoring centre, just one small part of the Berlin branch’s extensive complex. Waiting outside were Cleary’s functionaries, who trailed him as he strode away.

“Prep helicopters and a full operations team,” Cleary instructed.

“We’ll have to use the locals,” Cleary’s assistant said. “Our own forces are still being cleared.”

“They haven’t been cleared yet?”

“They’re a heavily armed contingent of non-governmental soldiers with magical abilities, sir. The German government, the Berlin steering committee and the International Committee are dragging their feet. They’re trying to dig up our objective and you said secrecy is paramount so I chose discretion over applying pressure.”

Cleary nodded.

“It was the right choice but now we have a window of unknown duration. Use the local teams and prep them for departure.”

“Destination?”

“The Ziller Valley.”

“Austria?” the assistant asked. “That will add complications.”

“Handle them. Speed over everything.”

“I’ll make sure any complications are dealt with by the time you’re in the air, sir.”

“Where is Gerling?”

“The spa facility, sir. Would you like me to send someone?”

“I’ll go,” Cleary said. “Get going; I want wheels up in ten.”

\*\*\*

The landscape Jason found himself in was an alien reimagining of the space by the river he had just left. Like the space in which he claimed the door, it was washed into monochrome by the light that shone with no apparent source. In this case, the light was silver instead of amber, giving everything a blank metallic sheen.

The surroundings looked vaguely natural at a distance, but up close it was clear that everything was composed of tiny cubes, as if the entire landscape had been built from tiny, silver Lego bricks.

Jason felt the aura of the place trying to suppress his own, giving him the unusual sensation of feeling feeble before an overwhelming power. It had only been a couple of years since Jason was freshly-arrived in the other world, feeling vulnerable and exposed every day. In this place, that feeling came back. It was as if he were standing before the full vastness of the cosmos and being shown his tiny, irrelevant place in it.

Shaking off the sensation, Jason extended his aura out, pushing back against the oppressive force to expand his senses. The first thing he detected was points of power, buried everywhere under the landscape. Unlike the transformation events that revealed only a single reality core with each event, the doorway gave Jason ready access to a treasure trove. He left them where they were as he started to move.

Exploring the space with his senses, he walked slowly, trying to understand the complexities of the world around him. He slowly began to marry what he was perceiving with the theory he had learned but it was slow going. He took his time, examining tiny aspects of the magic flowing through the place like duelling orchestras.

When he finally managed to truly grasp the nature of just one tiny aspect, fitting it to the theory Dawn had been stuffing into his head, it felt like a triumph. It was a first step, allowing him to move onto the next.

\*\*\*

Kaito’s drones were the first to detect the approaching helicopters and he warned the others. Farrah looked unhappily at the door standing out in the open. Jason’s party interface had terminated the moment he entered, leaving no way to communicate with him.

“We can’t let him walk out of there not knowing,” Farrah said.

“His freedom is paramount,” Dawn agreed. “The question is how powerful the forces approaching are. If they aren’t too...”

Farrah looked at Dawn, who had trailed off, wide-eyed.

"What is it?" Farrah asked.

"Gold ranker," Dawn whispered.

Farrah froze for a moment and then turned to the others.

"Everyone into the helicopter!" she yelled, shoving Dawn in the direction of the vehicle. "Get in it and go, all of you! As quick as you can!"

"What about you?" Kaito asked.

"I'll get Jason and we'll portal back to the cloud house," Farrah said. "Rendezvous there, no more questions. As fast as you can go, gods dammit!"

Without another word, Farrah plunged into the portal. Dawn hurried toward the helicopter.

"Move!" she ordered. "We may already be moving too late!"

They clambered into the side door of the helicopter and it lifted into the air, even before Kaito slid into the pilot seat. Using every power at his disposal, Kaito accelerated the vehicle, sending it firing through the air faster than any ordinary helicopter could match.

"What is happening?" Akari asked.

"There's a gold-rank essence user on one of those helicopters," Dawn said.

"A category-four?" Akari asked, her face turning pale. "Since when do they even exist?"

"China and the United States both had people reach gold-rank several years ago," Dawn explained. "They have been keeping them in magical stasis since then."

"It's true, then," Asya said. "They really do have them."

"Yes," Dawn said. "Now that they are operating openly, I am more free to speak on it."

"Why weren't you before?" Greg asked.

"There are rules by which I am required to operate," Dawn explained. "They are a frustrating but necessary restriction for someone like me to intervene in the affairs of your world."

"They must be using reality cores to sustain the category four," Asya reasoned.

"It seems likely," Dawn said.

"How many are we dealing with?" Itsuki asked.

"One," Dawn said. "One is all it takes."

She bowed her head, crestfallen.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For not telling us earlier?" Asya asked. "You told us what you could on the way to Makassar."

“No,” Dawn said. “I’m sorry for what is about to happen. The gold-ranker has left his helicopter. Everyone get out the gold spirit coins that Jason gave you and eat them when I say.”

\*\*\*

Gerling hurtled through the air, periodic explosions throwing him onward, faster and faster. For all its speed, Kaito’s bronze-rank helicopter, even with Kaito using every power at his disposal, could not match the crude explosion-flight of the gold ranker. The helicopter opened up with weapons and deployed drones to intercept but Gerling went through them as if they were a light pattering of rain. When Gerling struck the helicopter, it exploded in a burst of force and fire, tiny pieces scattering across the sky.



## Chapter 388

### Loaded For Battle

The alien landscape of the node space was an uncanny mix of familiar features washed out in metallic silver light. A close examination of the ground, rocks and plants did not help, being made up of tiny blocks that gave it the feel of a low-resolution image. Jason wandered over to the river, which he found looked like mercury under the monochrome light.

Jason was uncomfortably uncertain about how to identify if he had the right node, figure out how to alter it and finally repair it without making things worse. Even the terrifyingly knowledgeable Dawn had limited advice. She told him to trust his senses over his eyes and to take his time, matching the theory he had been taught to the reality he encountered. Once he understood one on terms of the other, he would be ready to intervene. To Jason, that sounded a lot like 'get in there and figure it out, idiot.'

He wandered in search of some core area; a big magical-looking thing he could interact with. Eventually, as his aura adapted to the harsh conditions of the space's own corrosive aura, he realised that the entire space was the core he was seeking out.

Despite all the magical theory he had studied, he was unprepared for the discovery that the very land he was walking through was the mechanism he had been searching for. The work of the original Builder was so vast and more nuanced than Jason could even begin to comprehend. For a moment, he despaired of ever understanding enough to begin his task, let alone complete it.

Schooling his negative thoughts he renewed his determination, once more probing the space around him with his magical and aura senses. He stopped looking for individual elements and started looking at everything as a collective whole. His more holistic approach swiftly reveal incongruities in the otherwise exquisite design.

The original artistry of the place, expanded over billions of years from the reality seed from which his universe had been created, was far too sophisticated for Jason to interfere with in any way beyond crude bumbling. Fortunately, this had also been true for whoever had made the changes Jason had come to correct.

The design of the space was so magnificent in its sophistication that it blurred the lines of what constituted the natural world.

"I hope the intelligent design people don't find out about this."

Jason was looking at the blueprints of reality. The underpinnings of matter and energy; the book in which the laws of physics were written. Incepted as a seed from which

the entire universe sprouted, it was like looking at the results of a self-learning program that had been running for eons. Jason was staggered at a mind that could accomplish all that, if such a thing could even be called a mind. Jason was filled with awe and – for the first time since learning of its existence – respect for what the Builder was.

Seeing the result of the Builder's core purpose, creating universes, it brought home to Jason the vast alien consciousness that even the newer, once-mortal builder must possess. It reinforced what Dawn had told him about great astral beings needing mortal vessels not just to interact with physical reality but even to think on a mortal scale. Jason had thought that the Builder he encountered had been using the bodies he inhabited as interchangeable puppets. Now he realised that Thadwick and the other body he used may have had much more of an effect on the Builder than he previously imagined.

"You picked a dud vessel there, mate," Jason muttered to himself. He had to wonder how much the cultists who prepared Thadwick to serve as a vessel understood the process. Then he remembered that this was done right after Rufus had wiped out the local leadership. It was likely that they had managed to dig out the mechanisms for creating vessels without grasping the ramifications of who they selected to be the raw material. Choosing the most expendable person had ramifications that were unfortunate for the Builder's cult but a blessing for Jason himself.

The inexpert alterations Jason sensed in the node space were marring the sublime intricacy of the original work. This made the crude flaws in what was otherwise a perfect system easy to pick out. Like a scratch in a record, they threw off the harmony of the pattern with a jolt.

Jason and his team had been unsure of how reliable their method of identifying the correct nodes was. They had been successful the first time out, but whether this would continue or if they just got lucky, he didn't yet know.

Dawn had advised Jason to take his time to comprehend the space properly and that was exactly what he did. The more he examined the perfection of the design, the more the changes he spotted seemed blasphemous. The door Jason had used to access this space was created by the second Builder, which made sense to Jason. He could not imagine the person who created the magnificence around him giving some idiot the tools to vandalise it.

Jason wasn't sure how long he spent working to understand the node space with what amounted to meditative examination. He had an eerie feeling that time flowed differently within it, although that was more likely to be his imagination than the reality. Sensing the space around him and trying to transpose that with his understanding of astral

magic theory was challenging. It was the difference between having an anatomy textbook open in front of him and a surgery patient open in front of him. Fortunately, his goal was not to make changes but undo the damage that had already been done.

Jason's examination finally helped him understand that if he could delicately undermine the changes that had been made, the space would heal itself. Rather than relying on Jason's ham-fisted fumbling, it would be more like plucking a splinter than stitching up a wound. The actual mechanism for making changes was ostensibly easy, just a little well-placed aura pressure, but Jason did not rush. Measure twice, cut once was good advice for the building blocks of a house, let alone the building blocks of the universe.

Finally, Jason made his first adjustment; a tiny, delicate and oh-so-careful change. He then watched and waited, hoping he hadn't made things worse. Straining his perception to the limit, he finally sensed signs that the affected area was returning to its natural state as the garish wound settled back into its pristine surroundings. He continued observing until he was certain that he wasn't just imagining the gradual shift change before moving on to do it again.

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In the space between Jason's magical archway and the operations camp rapidly established by the Network tactical support team, Gerling dropped the ragged, unconscious Asano sisters on the ground. Network personnel moved forward to clamp category-three suppression collars onto their necks, while someone brought Gerling a folding chair and a can of beer. Cleary came out of the command tent and walked over as Gerling sat down, unconcerned as he waited for Jason to emerge.

"We're looking at using reality cores to potentially develop category four suppression collars," Cleary said, looking at the unconscious sisters. "More category four essence users is obviously the priority but we're sure the Chinese have their own category fours already, which are most likely being woken up like you."

"You want to lock them down if we can, instead of killing them?" Gerling asked. "Seems like an unnecessary risk."

"Not my call," Cleary said. "A category-three collar is all we need for Asano, in any case. We didn't find any trace of Farrah Hurin, so we suspect she went in to warn him and he'll know what he's walking into. He could emerge at any moment."

"What about the others?" Gerling asked.

"The unknown entity, Dawn, appears to have been killed by the explosion. We're taking samples from what's left of her but it's not much. The category twos survived the

explosion, probably by consuming high-rank spirit coins, according to early examination of the bodies. Between the explosion and the subsequent weakening effect, though, only one survived the fall. It was the Tiwari boy, using a teleport power to escape the helicopter right before you hit it.

“He got away?”

“No. He’s stealthy but our category-threes tracked him down. He’s under interrogation now.”

“Bring him out,” Gerling said. “The bodies, too. You said you wanted Asano humbled, right? Let’s show him the extent of his failure.”

\*\*\*

Farrah was increasingly suffering as she forced herself onward through the alien silver landscape. Her excellent control over her aura prevented it from collapsing suddenly, eking out every scrap of strength before it finally gave way. She continued searching for Jason regardless, even as the mystical corrosion started impacting her body. She finally found Jason returning to the door, having rectified the node as best he could.

“What are you doing?” he asked her moving close and pushing his own aura out to protect her. The overextension meant that his own aura was being chewed away but he ignored it, leading Farrah back in the direction of the door.

“The Network will be waiting outside,” Farrah said. “They have a gold-ranker with them.”

“China?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about the others?”

“They fled in Kaito’s helicopter. I don’t know if they got away.”

“If they got caught, I’ll open a portal for you to get them out through while I distract the gold-ranker. I’m what he’s here for. If they go away, I’ll open a portal for us to get out through.”

“Don’t risk yourself. You’re the one who can fix the world, now.”

“They won’t kill me. They need me alive.”

“Do they need your arms and legs?”

“I’ve been through worse than anything they can do, and I still have tricks up my sleeve.”

\*\*\*

Jason and Farrah stepped out of the magic door, which descended into the ground and vanished. Farrah had her obsidian armour and sword already conjured, while Jason

had his blood robes, cloak and his dagger. He also had two orange and blue orbs with an eye pattern floating around him. Jason's familiar, Gordon, could surround himself with six orbs; three primarily blue with some orange and three primarily orange with some blue.

As of silver-rank, and while Gordon was subsumed into Jason, Jason was now able to call up one of each orb for his own use. Just like Gordon, he could make attacks with them or use the new functions available as of silver rank. One orb could trigger the butterfly effect that spread Jason's afflictions, while the other could turn into a floating shield.

There was a Network operations camp set up nearby, the layout familiar to Farrah and Jason both. It was some distance away, as the magic door had been given a lot of space. The only things nearby were the folding chair containing Gerling and the people around him, living and dead.

The Asano sisters were alive but much worse for wear, collared and sprawled on the ground. Itsuki was also collared and unconscious, his wound suggesting he went down fighting. Jason could sense their auras, suppressed though they were. He could not sense Kaito, Asya, Greg or Dawn. There were three corpses on the ground, too damaged to recognise, but he knew.

In the folding chair was a man sitting amongst Jason's beaten and killed companions with a can of beer in his hand, as if he were at a casual barbecue. He was a hairy behemoth, in plain fatigues who tossed aside the can as he rose slowly from the chair. The can landed on a body whose long dark hair hadn't all been burned away.

\*\*\*

Inside Jason's spirit Vault, Jason's family looked up at a sky filling with angry red clouds as thunder pealed. The floral scent of the gardens turned coppery as the flowers faded and the plants grew savage barbs.

A scared Emi hugged her father tightly. They all knew they were in Jason's soul.

"Daddy, what's happening to Uncle Jason?"

"I don't know, Sweetie," Ian said, placing a comforting hand on his daughter's head. "I don't know."

\*\*\*

Gerling was around ten metres away from Jason and Farrah and took a few steps forward.

"Look at you two, all loaded for battle. You think you can beat me?"

"Let the others go," Jason said. "I have what you want. They get you nothing, now."

“If it were up to me, I’d go for it,” Gerling said. “Personally, I’d like for you and me to rumble. I want to see all this power you’re meant to have for myself. But the big boys back home don’t want you beaten. They want you broken. Humbled. You’ve been walking around, doing whatever you want for far too long. It’s time for you to learn that you don’t run this world, Asano. We do.”

“You don’t have to kill anyone else,” Jason said.

“Yeah,” Gerling acknowledged. “It’s not exactly out of my way, though.”

“Get them out,” Jason told Farrah silently through the voice chat of his party interface and then burst into action, charging directly at Gerling as Shade bodies spread out beside him.

A wild grin erupted on Gerling’s face and he threw a fist at Jason from which a bolt of force shot out. Jason moved to step into a Shade body and shadow-jump away, only for it to fail. He felt some oppressive magic shut him down the moment he tried and the force bolt exploded as it struck him, throwing him through the air.

Jason used his silver-rank agility to acrobatically adjust his trajectory, flipping in the air to land on his feet. The simple attack was not a high damage one but coming from a gold-ranker it still felt like being hit with a hammer. He resumed his charge, not seeming to dodge a second bolt but when it struck Jason it passed right through.

At silver rank, one of the effects of Jason’s cloak was to give him some limited ability to manipulate space. It had taken him some time to get a handle on it, but now Jason could dodge attacks in such a way as they seemed to hit. It was an ability with limitations and restrictions that Jason expertly hid, making what was little more than a magically enhanced dodge appear as a mysterious defensive power.

Missing his attack didn’t dismay Gerling, instead, delighting him as he launched himself forward to meet Jason in a rush. He tried to crash-tackle the smaller man but Jason managed to evade. Some strange magic was preventing his shadow jumps but that was not the extent of his evasive skills. Using Shade’s bodies for pure obfuscation, Jason stepped through them, one of many dark figures for Gerling to pin down.

The gold-ranker’s first approach was to swing with his fists as they shimmered with force. Jason had more skill, more combat experience and was devilishly elusive. It still wasn’t enough in the face of the gold-ranker’s raw speed and a fist soon landed in Jason’s gut, sending him tumbling across the grass.

Gerling followed up quickly, punting Jason before he had a chance to get up. Once more, Jason rolled across the ground after suffering a savage blow. Gerling leapt into the air and used a special attack that drove him down like a hammer, Jason barely rolling

away as Gerling's boots hit the ground. The attack still caused a small crater, the secondary force shattering the shield Jason managed to interpose using one of the orbs floating around him. Jason was showered in earth and once more sent tumbling away.

Lying where he fell, Jason raised an arm in Gerling's direction but it wasn't aimed at the gold-ranker. While Gerling had been kicking Jason along the ground like a ball, Jason had been taking the blows, letting them knock him further and further from Itsuki and the Asano sisters. Farrah had made her way to the prisoners and Jason raised a portal arch right next to them.

Gerling turned and looked, not rushing after Jason or the portal as he stood and laughed. The arch rose up like normal, but instead of filling with a dark portal, it remained empty and inert.

"You didn't seriously think we'd try this without doing something about those portals, right?" Gerling mocked.

## Chapter 389

### Going For Gold

Jason and Farrah both extended their senses when the arch remained empty and the portal failed to open. If they hadn't been so shocked by their captured and dead companions they might have paid more attention to their surroundings but it was only now that they detected the magical devices set up in a wide circle around them. Farrah was familiar with the magic and knew it would be made up of a series of magic rods hammered into the ground, just out of sight.

"It's a dimensional condensation net," she told Jason through their party chat. "Keep him distracted while I take it out."

Jason cast a spell at Gerling.

*"Your fate is to suffer."*

Gerling glared at him.

"A category three actually affecting me with his crap?" Gerling said, and then looked down at his arm. While kicking Jason across the ground, he hadn't even noticed Jason getting in the two shallow cuts. Wounds that shallow should have already healed, demonstrating the noxiousness of Jason's abilities, something Gerling had been thoroughly warned about. Gerling looked back up at Jason even as Jason rapidly chanted more spells.

*"Bleed for me."*

*"Bear the mark of your transgressions."*

Fresh blood leaked from the two cuts and a symbol was branded onto the back of his hand by a small flash of transcendent damage.

Despite knowing full well the nature of Jason's power, Gerling didn't rush, staring down Jason.

"I don't like your aura," Gerling said. "I can feel it. Judging me. I'm not yours to judge, Asano."

Gerling projected his aura to suppress Jason's and was startled at the result. He had heard that Jason's aura was strong but he wasn't prepared for the degree to which that was true. Gerling's gold rank aura was stronger but far from overwhelming, despite the full rank of difference. Even that gap was made up by the difference in aura control. Gerling's aura control skills were adequate but Jason's were immaculate. Trying to suppress Jason's aura was like trying to grip a wet, frictionless ball that kept slipping through his fingers.



Jason gave no reaction to Gerling's attack, as if he hadn't even noticed. Instead, he looked at the conjured dagger in his hand as it started to transform. The sinister blade grew longer as it extended into a sword shape, also changing colour. It turning from obsidian black and blood red to pristine silver. The red embellishment remained but the barbed motif was smoothed into clean lines, as well as bright red runes set into the blade.

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#### Ability: [Blade of Doom] (Doom)

- Conjunction (holy, unholy, curse, disease, poison).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Silver 1 (19%).
  
- Effect (iron): Conjures [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation]. Attacks made with Ruin will inflict an instance of [Vulnerable] and refresh any wounding effects on the target. Wounding effects refreshed by Ruin require more healing than normal to negate. Ruin is an unholy object.
  
- Effect (bronze): Ruin inflicts one instance each of [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit].
  
- Effect (silver): Blade gains a second form: [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice]. Attacks made with Penitent will inflict an instance of [Price in Blood] and refresh any wounding effects on the target. Wounding effects refreshed by Penitent require more healing than normal to negate. Penitent is a holy object.
  
- [Vulnerable] (affliction, unholy, stacking): All resistances are reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to cleanse instances of [Resistant] on a 1:1 basis.
  
- [Ruin of the Blood] (damage-over-time, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  
- [Ruin of the Flesh] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  
- [Ruin of the Spirit] (damage-over-time, curse, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the curse is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  
- [Price in Blood] (affliction, holy, blood, stacking): This affliction is applied equally to the person it is inflicted upon and the person who inflicts it. This affliction cannot be cleansed while a person who shares it is alive and is immediately negated if the person who shares it dies. Damage between people who share the affliction is increased, including damage sources in place prior to this effect. Damage from holy sources is further increased. Only damage actually inflicted is increased; damage

negated by damage reduction and protection abilities is not. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

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The second form of the Blade of Doom power was a double-edge sword with a double-edged power. The Price in Blood affliction caused both the deliverer and the recipient to hurt each other all the more, making avoiding damage a critical objective. It was a massive gamble against a gold-rank enemy but silver-rank attacks against such a foe were like digging through a brick wall with a spoon and Jason needed to hold Gerling's attention.

Jason stilled the storm of fury in his soul, tapping into his meditative techniques to push the rage and pain from his mind and let a calm settle over him. He knew that control was what he needed, while the illusory strength of passion would only hurt him. If he were alone he might have been consumed by it but he still had people he needed to get out alive and couldn't allow himself the indulgence. A calm came over him as his silver eyes locked onto Gerling and he started walking slowly forward. Gerling grinned, rushing at Jason to swing a fist at lightning speed.

Gold rankers were absurdly fast. Jason had seen Emir move at full speed a few times and, to iron-rank Jason, it had been indistinguishable from Sophie's movement powers. The speed attribute alone of a gold-ranker was almost a teleportation power. Even at bronze-rank, the speed of a gold-ranker would be little more than a blur. Only at silver could Jason's reflexes keep up at all, and even then it was like moving through molasses.

Jason had every other advantage. His skill, both in terms of fighting technique and the use of his abilities, was as far above Gerling's as Gerling's raw power was above Jason's. Jason's powers were also better suited to a close-quarters fight. His cloak hid his movements and manipulated space, while his weapon gave him the reach on the unarmed Gerling.

Gerling's powers, on the other hand, made him more of a siege weapon than a duellist. His explosive powers were better suited to assaulting an army than a person. Even so, he was simply so fast, so strong and so tough that it didn't matter. Jason landed half a dozen hits with his sword, massively accelerating his already locked-in suite of powers and Gerling was barely impaired.

It took Gerling time to hit Jason, whose skill and abilities made him frustratingly evasive. When the hit landed, however, the result was devastating. Gerling's strength, enhanced by an explosive fist power and Jason's own damage-accelerating power left Jason as little more than a bloody mess, bouncing along the ground like a skipping stone.

Instead of following up, Gerling dashed off to arrive in front of Farrah. She had been making her way to one of the buried rods restricting Jason's portal, using her lava cannon power to devastate the team of silver-rankers that moved to intercept her.

"Hello, hot stuff," Gerling said and swung his fist.

Farrah did not fight like Jason, as reflected by her equipment. Where Jason conjured sleek robes and a wispy cloak, she conjured heavy obsidian armour. Instead of a dagger, she conjured a huge sword that could extend out into a barbed lava whip. She did also have orbs floating around her, but instead of glowing eyes, they were searing flames.

Jason's style was elusive, deceptive and mobile. Farrah, by contrast, was all about power; not just using it but also dealing with it. For all the power at her command, she had won it fighting monsters that were stronger and tougher than she was, just like Gerling.

Gerling was surprised at his inability to land a solid hit as Farrah slight but efficient movement always managed to deflect his hits or shift her angle just the right way to negate the bulk of the damage. Only the explosive power shrouding his fists had a major effect, blasting off chunks of her armour.

Farrah drew on her vast combat experience and moved with the hits, letting it lead her into counterattacks. Like Jason, Farrah was much more adept with her powers than Gerling. Her whip sword made of lava and obsidian danced like a monstrous snake as it drew blood, while the burning orbs floating around her lunged in to burn his face, distracting him. The attacks had full effect, as well, the damage reduction from his superior rank not being a factor.

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#### Ability: [Limit Breaker] (Potent)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Silver 2 (07%).
- Effect (iron): Ignore rank disparity in resistances and damage reduction.
- Effect (bronze): Increase the effect of abilities by increasing their cost.
- Effect (silver): The enhanced state from consuming a spirit coin lasts for significantly longer and the after-effects are reduced.

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Farrah attacks also left Gerling covered in burning flames. Momentarily being placed on the back foot enraged him and he clapped his hands together to create an explosion that swept out in front of him. At the same time, though, a wall of obsidian rose up between

him and Farrah. He sneered as the explosion blasted the wall to fragment, only to be startled when the fragments flew the wrong way. Even as the force of the explosion passed through the shattered wall and knocked Farrah off her feet, the fragments of wall blasted back into Gerling, digging into his flesh. Lying on the ground, Farrah quickly chanted a spell.

*“Children of the volcano, be reborn in fire.”*

The shards of obsidian buried in Gerling’s flesh melted into magma, inflicting a pain even the gold ranker couldn’t ignore. Farrah got to her feet as Gerling yelled in rage and pain, stumbling back, not even hearing the quiet chant behind him.

*“Your blood is not yours to keep but mine on which to feast.”*

At silver-rank, Jason recovery powers were terrifying to behold. Far from appearing near death, he now looked completely fresh, his conjured robes and cloak covering the blood coating his body underneath. The life force he drained from the gold-ranker brought his health back up to full and beyond, with his Sin Eater ability allowing his health to surpass its normal maximum.

Jason didn’t launch Colin into the fray, and not just because Gerling was covered in flames. Area attacks were a critical weakness for swarm-type enemies and Gerling seemed to be all about explosions. More importantly, Jason was going to need the healing his familiar provided by remaining subsumed. Knowing he would need to rely on himself, he used a damage spell that took advantage of the afflictions still accumulating on Gerling.

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#### Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell.
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.
  
- Current rank: Silver 1 (09%).
  
- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.
  
- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Penitence].
  
- Effect (silver): Damage per affliction can be increased by increasing the mana cost to high, very high, or extreme. This reduces the cooldown to 20 seconds, 10 seconds or none. Consecutive, extreme-cost uses have a shorter incantation.
  
- [Penitence] (affliction, holy): Gain an instance of [Penance] for each curse, disease, poison or unholy effect that is cleansed from you. This is a holy effect.

- [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
- 

*“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”*

Jason’s abilities were largely mana efficient, a trait shared by most affliction specialists. Punition stood out as his big, instantaneous damage spell, although it required set up to be effective. As of silver-rank, it became a mana sink giving him a large hammer to swing when he needed to go all out.

Against a silver-rank opponent, even a moderate time under Jason’s afflictions would have placed them in a bad position. Gerling, however, demonstrated the near-indestructibility of a gold-ranker, showing the marks of both Jason and Farrah’s attacks without yet being impeded by them. Even Jason’s newly-enhanced Punition spell failed to make a sizeable dent in the gold-ranker’s condition, although it was enough to surprise their powerful enemy.

Gerling was frustrated at how much he was being shown up by the two silver-rankers that should have been overwhelmed by his power to the point that he hadn’t treated them as real opponents. As he was filled with anger, that changed. He hammered his fists together and a powerful blast exploded out, sending Farrah and Jason flying.

The two silver-rankers scrambled to their feet as Gerling strode from the cloud of earth and dust thrown up by his power. He was still wreathed in fire from Farrah’s abilities but his disregard and iron glare made the flames seem more like his power than hers. He stomped his foot and the ground in a wide area around her exploded up, throwing her into the air and battering her with both force and magically-empowered rocks that exploded as they came near her.

At the same time, Gerling threw a fist in Jason’s direction and he was blasted with a broad wave of force. If he had not been denied shadow-jumping he could have avoided it but was instead battered and blasted back.

This was the signal of a change in the tenor of the fight as Gerling unleashed one area attack after another in an unrelenting assault that gave neither Jason nor Farrah time to recover and rally. It was a terrible strategy against enemies of a similar rank as such abilities were high cost and relatively low damage, which is how the silver-rankers survived the barrage. Jason’s stacked rapid healing effects kept him healing through the damage while Farrah’s armour and magically enhanced toughness allowed her to endure.

\*\*\*

Network personnel were watching from the nearby camp. The second in command of the Berlin forces threw an unhappy glance at Cleary, on the other side of the camp.

“Boss,” she told her commander, “this isn’t right. I’m pretty sure we’re working for the bad guys, here.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” he growled.

“Maybe we don’t have to?”

“What are you suggesting? That’s a category four over there and I have zero interest in having my head crushed in his fist like a soft fruit.”

“Those things stopping them from escaping. Maybe we could take one out.”

“How? By taking out our own people guarding them? Look, I’m not opposed to doing something. Just come up with an idea better than that.”

“Maybe we just need the right opportunity, Boss. If it doesn’t come, it doesn’t come, but if we’re ready and it does...”

“Alright,” the commander said. “Spread the word. Careful and quiet.”

\*\*\*

Jason and Farrah’s superior skills were overwhelmed by the combination of power disparity and cheap tactics, Gerling having enough area abilities to almost stun lock them both. Their attempts to push back fell short, Jason barely managing to stay alive, throwing out Punishment and his health drain spell every chance he could. He called out Gordon, who chained his shield orbs to protect himself and Jason, as well as inflict his butterfly effect on Gerling. After three attacks, each one destroying a shield orb, a disruptive force blast from the gold ranker left the incorporeal familiar ragged. Since it took a full minute to recover a destroyed orb, Jason called Gordon back into himself before the familiar’s vessel was destroyed.

The butterflies manifesting on Gerling did not impair the gold ranker; instead, they flew off in every direction. The Network forces had staged teams near the buried rods preventing Jason’s portal from working and the butterflies went in their direction. Some of the butterflies were caught up in Gerling’s area attacks and others were shot down by the Network troops using disruptive force attacks that caused the butterflies to detonate. As Jason’s powers kept multiplying the butterfly affliction, though, more and more butterflies went out, increasing the pressure.

Farrah burned through her mana re-conjuring armour over and over as the explosive attacks broke it apart. As the area attacks drew close to the Asano sisters and Itsuki, who had made their way to the inactive portal as they watched the conflict. Farrah knew she

had to push back before their collared companions were caught up and killed. After withstanding another attack, Farrah took out a gold spirit coin and slipped it into her mouth.

Farrah's body was immediately flooded with power, her Limit Breaker ability handling the gold-rank energy in a smooth flow, compared to the brutish force other essence users experienced when using a coin. She leapt through the air using a special attack, her sword lighting up with white-hot flames as Gerling's latest area attack failed to knock back the momentum of her enhanced attack and forcing him to take it head-on.

Unfortunately, he could. Even with her attributes raised to gold, Farrah was not a match for a true gold-ranker, although the boost was enough to push him with her greater mastery of both fighting technique and ability use. In the break, Jason made his way for the closest buried rod, hoping to disrupt the effect.

Gerling was not unaware of Jason's actions and used one of the long cooldown abilities from his vast essence. A void sphere appeared in the middle of the area they were fighting, creating a massive gravitational pull towards it. Gerling and Farrah both resisted, Gerling only partially affected by his own ability while Farrah dug her sword into the ground as an anchor. Itsuki and the Asano sisters braced themselves against Jason's inactive portal arch.

Jason and the Network troops around the perimeter of the battle zone suffered the full brunt, all being dragged to the sphere, which then exploded. Jason and the other silver-rankers survived, although all were savaged by the raw power of the blast that scattered them back around the battlefield. All the bronze-rankers in the Network teams sucked in were dead.

\*\*\*

At the camp, Cleary ordered new teams in to replace the one that had been guarding the buried rods. The commander stormed up to him, furious.

"Are you joking? Your guy just took out half my entire contingent, a lot of them dead. Now you want me to send more in there?"

"Unless you want to be the next on the list when my category-four friend comes back, yes."

The commander bared his teeth but finally turned away.

"Alright," he announced to his sections. "Everyone head to your assigned back-up points."

The commander glanced back at Cleary.

"And remember what you were just told," the commander said to his personnel.

"Move out."

Cleary frowned, uncertain of what the commander had been referencing but put it to the back of his mind as he returned his attention to the fight. The fact that there was a fight at all, rather than a one-sided hammering was not a part of his plans.

\*\*\*

Jason managed another draining spell on Gerling, instantaneously flooding Jason with healing. Despite the massive health drain, it barely seemed to affect Gerling. Despite Farrah's flames and Jason's afflictions, Gerling was still going strong, the absurd resilience of a gold-ranker proving dominant. If Jason had a whole team of silver-rankers to hold up Gerling, he could probably do the damage required to take him down but just himself and Farrah were not enough. Even with his afflictions running rampant, Gerling was still going strong.

Butterflies were landing on the silver rankers lying hurt on the ground, even as the freshly-healed Jason stood up, delivering affliction packages that would most likely kill them before they got help. Jason used his Feast of Absolution power, replenishing his mana and stamina as he drained the afflictions from them, making sure not to include Gerling. Gerling was not hurt to the point that switching from the sinister afflictions to holy ones would be effective.

Farrah was winding down, her gold-rank power fading away. Soon it would be gone and she would be weaker than before, so Jason made another run at the buried rods, even as reinforcements from the camp moved around the outside of the battlefield to guard them.

Farrah was sent hurtling off as her power faded and Gerling hit her square in the chest with a potent ability. Gerling then zipped to intercept Jason, grabbing his neck from behind and tossing him back, far from the buried rods. Gerling moved over Jason and planted a foot on his chest.

"You're done, Asano. You put up a good fight. If we were the same rank, you'd have won. But we're not. Power is always king."

"In the other world, they call it the tyranny of rank," Jason said.

"Tyranny of rank? I like that."

"I hope you like your flesh melting off. Good luck clearing those afflictions."

"What did I just tell you? Luck doesn't matter. Skill doesn't matter. Only power matters."

Jason face filled with anguish as he felt a familiar surge of power from within Gerling, the reason that Gerling had been chosen as the gold-ranker they awoke. Gerling, it turned out, shared a power with Humphrey, also gaining it from the might essence. That power



was called Immortality, which instigated an incredibly powerful healing effect. It was a power known by the Magic Society, so after Humphrey had looked it up, Jason learned that, at silver-rank, it gained the ability to purge all afflictions, ignoring any and all effects that prevented cleansing. Jason had encountered a similar effect used by the archbishop of the church of Purity.

“That power,” Jason said. “A friend of mine has it. I know that it can bring you back from the dead at gold rank.”

“Now you know that killing me wouldn’t have helped you.”

“That’s alright,” Jason said. “Now I get to kill you twice.”

Gerling chuckled as he took a battered and singed but still functioning suppression collar from a belt satchel. As he bent down to put it on, explosions erupted around the edge of the battlefield.

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Moments earlier, Cleary had been watching with satisfaction as Gerling ended the fight. Farrah was badly hurt, her collared companions rushing to check on her. Asano was seemingly immortal but Gerling now had him literally underfoot. Too late, Cleary spotted the new teams at the buried rods digging into the ground before they all started running.

“What are they...?”

Grenades the teams had just dropped into holes alongside the rods started going off. The empty space in Jason’s inactive portal was suddenly filled with darkness, the Asano sisters dragging Farrah through, Itsuki following after. Cleary watched in horror as Jason slipped out from under Gerling’s foot and flung himself at the portal.

Gerling was only startled for a moment and he still had gold-rank reflexes. He threw out a hand in Jason’s direction and fired a force bolt. It flew past Jason, exploding between Jason and the portal, flinging Jason back even as Gerling moved forward. Gerling grabbed Jason’s head in a huge, meaty hand, clamping the suppression collar into place with the other.

As soon as Jason’s powers were cut off, the portal descended into the ground and vanished. Furious, Gerling hammered his fist into Jason’s head until Jason fell unconscious, and then hammered it some more.

\*\*\*

Jason woke up in a transport container, reinforced with what looked like a roll-cage, to which Jason had been very thoroughly chained, hands and feet. Jason waited to recover some more before acting, his portal still being a couple of minutes from being

usable again and knowing that he would need to move fast. His powers were suppressed but Colin, inside him, was still healing him at a formidable rate.

The container was on the move, on a transport helicopter Jason guessed from the motion. Gerling was likely to be close by but Jason wasn't going to risk extending his senses until he was prepared to act.

It was hard to sense if his powers were off cooldown while they were suppressed but this was something Jason was used to, having long used suppression collars in his aura training. That was how he could be sure when his portal was ready and he could begin to act.

Jason plotted through his series of rapid actions, ready to execute them as quickly as possible. He started by pushing off the silver-rank suppression effect with his aura, then conjuring his cloak and using the space distortion ability to slip out of the manacles and leg chains, even as he called up a portal. He dove through it just in time as the container was ripped apart to reveal Gerling, who had sensed Jason's aura when he overcame the collar. All Gerling found was Jason's portal, descending into the floor.

"What the fu—"

## Chapter 390

### Prepare For The Rematch

The cloud house was in a vacant lot of an abandoned Austrian town. Inside, Farrah, Itsuki and the Asano sisters waited anxiously. The portal had closed right behind them and Jason's fate was unknown. Farrah had taken out some suppression collar skeleton keys she had made herself after seeing the crude ones Jason had made. She unlocked the collars around the necks of the others, then magically examined them for tracking magic. The cloud house should be more than capable of blocking it but she wanted to be careful.

Ten minutes after they arrived, the portal reappeared and Jason stumbled through, the portal sinking into the floor immediately after. Farrah immediately wrapped him in a fierce hug. Once she let him go, Jason opened his spirit vault, concerned about whether his mental state, the suppression collar or both had affected his family within.

Heading into the vault, he immediately spotted the differences. The colour seemed washed out of everything, from the drab flowers to the grey sky. Rain was falling, which was not something he had seen before in his spirit vault. As soon as he emerged from the portal in the central pavilion, his family rushed up to him from where they had been clustered together in a small sitting area, under the pavilion.

"Jason, what happened?" Erika asked.

"Come out into the cloud house," he said. "We need to talk."

\*\*\*

"What in the god damn hell?" Cleary asked angrily, sitting in the transport helicopter as it approached the Berlin Network headquarters. "Our own people betrayed us and let Asano get away."

"No, they didn't," Gerling said. "They let his companions get away but we got Asano. Him getting loose was on us. He clearly had some means to disable a suppression collar."

"He was searched," Cleary said. "Thoroughly. If he had a magic key jammed up his ass, our sensors would have found it when we checked him."

"Lack of intel, then," Gerling said. "It must be some ability."

"To ignore a suppression collar?"

"Who knows what abilities he learned in the other world? His aura was like nothing I've ever seen, both in power and control. Based on the aura surge I felt when he was escaping, it's probably related to that."

"How can you be calm?" Cleary asked. "He got away."

“My job was to catch him and I caught him,” Gerling said. “Containment was your area and I’m the talent, which means your head is the one on the block.”

“I’m going to kill those traitorous bastards,” Cleary spat.

“No you’re not,” Gerling said.

“Excuse me?”

“You shanghaied a bunch of the Berlin branch’s tac-teams, got half of them killed and sent the other half to die. Are you that surprised they screwed you? I would have. Now you want to what? Take them back to their branch and execute them in front of the rest? They will string you up.”

“Not with you there.”

“If you want to go after them, that’s all you,” Gerling said. “They’ve already demonstrated what they’ll do when you push them hard enough, even when I am right there. Frankly, I admire them for having the sack to go for it.”

Cleary scowled unhappily but fell silent, calming himself with deep breaths. Only once the helicopter was about to land did he speak again, the tense rage in his voice replaced with weariness.

“Did I hear you call yourself the talent?”

“I regretted it immediately,” Gerling admitted.

\*\*\*

In the cloud house, Jason’s family and other companions sat in morose silence. Emi was curled up against her uncle, clutching onto him.

“What about the bodies?” Ian asked.

“I’ll make sure they’re sent home, with respect,” Jason said.

In the frenzy of the moment, Jason had been moving too fast for the horror of what had happened to catch him. Now that he’d stopped still, it came on in force. The image of the dead bodies at the man’s feet was seared into his brain. He lost track of them in the fight, unsure even how intact they were after all the area attacks being thrown around.

“What about Dawn?” Akari asked.

“What was with us wasn’t really her,” Farrah said. “I don’t know how long it will take but she will be back.”

“Isn’t there something you can do?” Erika asked. “You came back from...”

She struggled to say the words.

“...Farrah came back. Isn’t there some way for Kai to come back too?”

“I’m sorry, Eri,” Jason said.

“The circumstances were very specific,” Farrah added and the group fell silent again.

“What do we do now?” Akari asked.

“First thing is we lay low,” Jason said. “That gold-ranker is still out there and the resources the Americans have at their disposal are not to be underestimated. We have to be extremely careful.”

He winced, his expression filled with sorrow and self-recrimination.

“The way we should have been already,” he said. “I should never have let you all participate.”

“It was our choice,” Akari said. “You think you are the only one with the right to fight for their world? That only you are doing this for the right reasons? Kaito, Asya and Greg weren’t just doing this to help you with a personal project, Asano. We all came into this understanding what was at stake and the price we might have to pay.”

Jason stared at her with a deer in headlights stare, then gave the faintest of acknowledging nods.

\*\*\*

Things had not gone well at the Berlin branch, forcing the American contingent to hurriedly board their transport plane and decamp for the Ramstein Air Base in Germany's south-west. Despite Gerling's warning, Cleary had been startled at the Berlin branch's fury. If not for the presence of the gold-ranker, he realised that they may not have been allowed to leave at all.

“It's time to regroup anyway,” Gerling told him. “Asano is not going to continue his current approach. We need to consolidate our resources here in Europe before we get the whole continent up in arms because of how we're riding roughshod over their branches.”

“They'll do what they're told,” Cleary said.

“I think that you're overestimating how much crap people are willing to eat,” Gerling said. “You think most of the Network cares about reality cores that the vast majority of them will never so much as lay eyes on? That's the obsession of the few who will actually get to reap that power. Maybe you can't see it because you've been living through it, but those monster waves and these transformation events are terrifying to the people who don't have the power to fight against them. That's what the actual people who make up the Network care about, not which branch has the most category-fours for some pissing match.”

“Are you questioning our purpose here?” Cleary asked him.

“No,” Gerling said. “I'm just pointing out that it's *our* purpose. I hate to break it to you, Cleary, but however we end up spinning it, we're the bad guys. I'm on board with that and you need to be as well.”

\*\*\*

In Sydney, the steering committee of the local Network branch ended their meeting. All but one of the members shuffled out of the conference room, leaving Annabeth Tilden alone to exhaustedly rub her temples. Her brother, Terrance, came in after the committee members had left.

“Well?” he asked.

“We confirmed Asano escaped,” Anna. “He’s probably going to go on some kind of rampage.”

“I hope not. He’ll die, and if what he’s doing is important as he claims...”

“Yeah,” Anna said. “Ketevan has already made a formal request to Berlin for the return of the bodies to Australia. The bastards killed Asya.”

“What is our stance going to be?”

“Our steering committee is adopting a wait-and-see approach.”

“Meaning they’re going to chicken out until they find a bandwagon to jump on,” Terrance said. “Our people aren’t going to like that. Do you know how many of them have fought alongside Jason? Worked with Farrah on restoring the grid? Flew with Kaito or got a medivac to the Asano compound? If we lay down on this, we may have a rebellion on our hands.”

“You think I don’t know this?” Anna asked. “What do you think I’ve been trying to hammer into the heads of the steering committee?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t bother,” Terrance said.

“What are you saying?”

“The Network is fracturing, Anna. Maybe it’s time for a management restructure.”

“I’m hearing similar talk out of Europe,” Anna said. “The Berlin branch is furious about the International Committee forcing them to help the Americans and getting a bunch of their people killed. A lot of other branches are up in arms over the allocation of resources to fighting over reality cores instead of monster wave recovery. Now that we can monitor the oceans with the grid, there’s a lot of call for shifting priorities back to our traditional role.”

“That’s not going to happen. We’re out in the open, now. The leadership has been hiding their power and now they’re looking to flex in front of the whole world. They don’t care about stopping monsters as much as accruing political power.”

“That’s what worries me,” Anna said. “There’s talk of pressuring the International Committee to censure the US and China and force them to go back to the old priorities. That would be great except that neither one is going to roll over and show their stomach.”

“No, they won't. From their perspective, the International Committee serves them, not the other way around. It's just always been easier for them not to make a point of it. If the IC actually pushes it, the Network will fracture back into factions.”

“That may be inevitable. There has always been a disconnect between the leadership and the bulk of the Network's personnel, but now the leadership is throwing its authority around like never before. This couldn't have come at a worse possible time.”

There was a hard knock on the door and Michael Aram opened it and came in before waiting for a response.

“Anna, I've been contacted by Craig Vermillion.”

“We aren't exactly on the best terms with the Cabal right now,” Terrance said.

“He knows,” Aram said. “He knew you would trust me and asked me to set up a discreet meeting. I think you'll want to hear what he has to say.”

\*\*\*

Gerling had been assigned a pair of assistants to see to his needs. They were both young Network functionaries, iron-rank admin staff with no tactical training. One was David, a man who Gerling disliked for his annoyingly transparent ambition, but was enthusiastic about meeting Gerling's requests. Fiona was a plain but highly competent woman that Gerling appreciated for her ability to know when to be around and when not to be, compared to the stifling David.

Gerling was walking through an aircraft hanger to meet Cleary when his assistants approached him.

“We've found an elf for you, sir,” Fiona told Gerling.

“We have?” David asked.

“It turns out that one of the early reactions of people transforming into strange new species is—”

“Rich people paying to have sex with them,” Gerling realised.

“Precisely,” Fiona said. “Brothels are opening up like mushrooms after rain in the transformation zones and we have contracted someone who has quickly come into high demand, despite her considerable rates.”

“Excellent work.”

“Contracted?” David asked. “I thought we were just going to grab some elf.”

Gerling and Fiona both turned on him with disdain.

“Do you think I'm a rapist?” Gerling asked.

“You kill a lot of people,” David said uncertainly. “I thought you did what you wanted. Isn't that what power is for?”

“And you think what I want is to rape people? Fiona, get this guy replaced.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You just said that you wanted us to get you an elf!” David whined.

“I assumed not raping people went without saying,” Gerling said. “Fiona, make sure the next guy understands that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, and how did you go with getting the people I asked to have sent from the States?”

Fiona checked her watch.

“They should be wheels down in about seven hours, sir.”

“Thank you.”

“Sir...” David said.

“Make sure the next person isn’t like this idiot,” Gerling said to Fiona, gesturing at David. “Is he someone’s nephew or something?”

“His father is the Director of Tactical Operations in New York.”

“Ah. Probably just fire him, then, rather than fire him out of a cannon.”

“We don’t have a cannon, sir,” Fiona said. “I can probably find someone who can conjure one.”

“What?” David asked as Gerling chuckled.

“That’s fine,” Gerling said. “Just reassign him to someone who’ll appreciate a sycophant.”

“Very well, sir,” Fiona said. “Is there anything else?”

“Not unless you have anything else for me,” Gerling said.

Fiona waved her hand and a portal appeared. She reached in and pulled out a can of beer. Gerling laughed as he took it.

“You want to come work for me permanently, Fiona?”

“I would very much like that, sir.”

“Oh, come on,” David complained.

Gerling left his assistant and former assistant behind as he made his way to the office that Cleary had appropriated in the hangar. Cleary was standing over a desk with a monitor set into it, poring over a map on which transformation zones were marked. He looked up as Gerling came in without bothering to knock.

“You requested a training team be sent here from the US?” Cleary asked.

“That’s right.”



“You asked specifically for people that trained with Asano and Hurin in Australia. You want to learn more about them from people who know them?”

“No,” Gerling said. “Those people learned the techniques taught by Hurin and Asano and then brought them home. I want to learn about how they fight and how to fight like them.”

“You beat them both.”

“I should have annihilated them both. You don’t understand how much more powerful than them I am. My old instructor always said that I was coasting on the power of my attacks but I never listened and now Asano and Hurin made me look like a fool. Feel like a fool. You concentrate on finding them; you don’t need my help for that. I need to prepare for the rematch.”

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“Interesting choice of venue,” Anna said. She was in the townhouse that was previously the home of Jason’s Uncle Hiro, now apparently owned by the vampire, Craig Vermillion.

“After the EOA purchased all of Hiro’s assets, I quietly picked this up off them through an appropriate series of cut-outs,” Craig said. “I like to have an off-the-books spot with the little comforts.”

They sat down in the lounge.

“Before we begin,” Craig asked, “is it true about Asya?”

“Yes.”

Craig bowed his head.

“These are dark times, Anna.”

“What do you want, Craig? I have enough on my plate to be going on with.”

“Oh, it’s worse than you think. You are aware that the Cabal has been coming out on top in the contest for the reality cores.”

“I genuinely don’t care.”

“You should. The Network is not the only one threatening to fracture over the behaviour of its most powerful members.”

“Oh?”

“Do you know how vampires grow more powerful, Anna?”

“Time, right? But then you get too powerful and the ambient magic can’t sustain you.”

“Yes,” Craig said. “The old ones have all been slumbering since they reached what you call category four.”

Anna’s eyes went wide.

“Reality cores,” she whispered in horrified realisation.

“Exactly,” Craig said. “It’s not as simple as handing over a core but some of the Cabal’s upper echelons are working on imbuing blood with that power, which should be able to start waking them up. I’ve heard the rumours of the Chinese and Americans having people of that level and they’re probably stronger than an equivalent vampire. How many do they have, though? Two? Three? Five? I promise you that we have more.”

“How many more?”

“I’m not sure any one person knows,” Craig said. “The Cabal is a nest of secrets.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Anna asked. “You’re Cabal. You’re a vampire.”

“And I like the world the way it is. Was, before the damn EOA messed everything up. Even as bad as things have gotten, do you think I want the planet ruled by people with eight-century-old social values and a thirst for human blood?”

## Chapter 391

### Finish the Job

No one paid attention to one more man in a dark suit and dark glasses. There was no shortage of them as the funeral was conducted under a bright, clear sky, despite the winter. Jason's use of aura control had progressed to the point that even in a crowd with many essence users he could manipulate their perception to go unnoticed, even standing right amongst them.

It helped that all the essence users were lower rank than Jason. The network leadership would never allow precious silver-rankers to take time away when there could be a transformation zone to fight over at any moment. The Network members were mostly from the ranks, crowding the grassy, outdoor venue for Kaito's service. In the months he had been one of them, Kaito had flown them into hot zones, evacuated them when injured and delivered critical supplies in the midst of danger.

Jason watched Amy, standing stony-faced at the front. Someone had given her an aura suppression bracelet so her emotions weren't on open display in front of all the essence users present.

Publicly, Jason was a wanted criminal, internationally. A rogue element, responsible for bombings in Japan and killing Global Defense Network personnel in Austria. The Network leadership knew that with the failed capture attempt and the death of Jason's brother, lover and friend, they had declared war. Accordingly, they sought to sever Jason's influence and connections inside the Network.

Ostensibly, this meant that the Network was on the lookout for Jason at events like his brother's funeral. In reality, they knew that even a gold-ranker had failed to pin him down, with no shortage of people having died in the attempt. Most Network members didn't even agree with what the Americans had done, especially those from the Australian branches that had worked alongside Jason and his brother. The last thing the people looking for Jason wanted was to find him.

After the service, many people came up to Amy, offering their condolences. Her eyes went wide when she found Jason standing in front of her. She glanced at the people around them.

"How are you here?" she asked in a conspiratorial whisper. "Why aren't people jumping all over you?"

"A trick of perception. So long as no one draws too much attention to me, they won't notice that it's me."

“So I could yell out and people would try and grab you?”

“Yes.”

“Why shouldn’t I, then? You were meant to bring the father of my children back home.”

“I know,” Jason said, his voice cracking.

She scowled as they continued to converse in hushed tones.

“What are you going to do about the people that killed him?” she asked.

“The man in question is powerful. Far more than me but his time will come. First, I have to finish the job that Kaito and I started.”

“Is it worth it?” she asked.

Jason nodded.

“Things are going to get worse before they get better,” he said, “but Kaito played his part in getting us all past this. I know it isn’t a comfort, but he died for something that truly matters. To give his children a future.”

“I know it was his choice to go,” she said. “Even so, I can’t help but hate you for taking him.”

Jason nodded but said nothing else. If his words couldn’t make things better, he kept his mouth shut.

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Michael Aram discreetly approached Annabeth Tilden after the service, as she was walking back to the car with her wife. He was in charge of security and media management for the event.

“Committeewoman,” he greeted her, with a respectful nod.

“What is it, Aram? Shouldn’t you be answering to Ketevan?”

“She asked me to keep you in the loop. Some of our security personnel have glimpsed a blurred artefact on the camera feeds.”

“He’s here, then,” Anna said. “What did Keti tell you to do?”

“Pretend he isn’t.”

“Good. If he didn’t want us to know, we wouldn’t.”

“Is he provoking us?”

“Not at his brother’s funeral. He’s probably going to pay me one of his unexpected visits. Thank you, Aram.”

Aram left them and they reached their car, the driver opening the rear door to admit Anna and her wife. As they sat, a shadow emerged from Anna’s shadow to sit opposite them and Jason appeared from within it.

"Anna," he greeted, then turned to Anna's wife. "Susan. We haven't met since I obtained those paintings from your gallery."

"The paintings by Dawn," Susan said.

"Have you actually met the artist?" Jason asked.

"No," Susan said. "She always worked through an intermediary."

"I'll introduce you if I get the chance. She was killed alongside my brother but she'll be back, sooner or later."

Susan frowned but Anna forestalled questions with a shake of her head.

"Are you here to kill us?" Anna asked.

"I'm here to thank you for getting the bodies sent home," he said. "It would have been awkward to make arrangements myself, given the circumstances."

"Asya was a friend," Anna said. "Were you and her...?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm doubly sorry. There was talk of using the bodies or this funeral as bait," Anna said.

"I know," Jason said. "Thank you for putting a stop to that particular idea. My sister-in-law and I have our issues but she deserves to say goodbye to her husband in peace."

"You should know that the Americans may soon be too busy to direct more attention your way," Anna said.

"I'm aware," Jason said. "The Cabal leadership are looking at waking up old vampires, and both the Network and the Cabal are seeing dangerous splits between the leadership and the bulk of their membership. Medieval bloodsuckers and a potential magic civil war, all while the world is slowly being transformed."

"You know a lot. Have you been talking to Craig Vermillion?"

"No, Anna. I've been spying on you."

"Oh. Then you know about the gift I got for you?"

"I do. And thank you, even if it does play into your agenda."

"Be careful with it," Anna said. "I'm not entirely convinced it isn't a trap."

"The same has occurred to me. I'll be cautious."

"Mr Asano, the days ahead are going to be dark and full of chaos. Probably worse than what we've seen, if Vermillion's estimate on the number of ancient vampires is even close to accurate. Is what you're doing going to stop it?"

"I can stop the transformation events and cut off the reality core supply. Eventually. It just got harder now that I have to change up my methodology to avoid being hunted down."

People want what I have and it doesn't stop with the Americans. Being distracted by wider events isn't the same as giving up."

Anna nodded.

"There was some concern that you would lash out in revenge."

"I'm not strong enough to go after the gold ranker."

"I meant against the Network at large."

"Without the Network's tactical team having the courage to defy the gold-ranker, I would have lost even more people. I know that they were acting against the Americans rather than for me, but I'm grateful, nonetheless. I won't repay that with ill-placed vengeance."

"A lot of people will be glad to hear that."

"I won't deny I felt a powerful urge to start clearing out Network branches one by one," Jason confessed. "It was a closer thing than I'd like to admit, but there would be no coming back from that. Having power gives me a chance to do the things I need to, even when others say I shouldn't. Unfortunately, it also gives me the power to do things I want to, even when people are right that I shouldn't. It's a path to making costly mistakes."

"It was the Americans who did this, Mr Asano, not you."

"I could have done it differently. More carefully. I have to, now, but I could have from the start and kept others out of it. Not considering the consequences of my actions to the people around me is a lesson I've failed to learn before and this time it wasn't just a close call. The people around me paid the price for my arrogance and short-sightedness. Perhaps this time I will finally learn."

"What will you do now?"

"I'll make use your gift. Force the Americans to refocus their gold-rank assets on the transformation zones instead of me. Then I'll get back to the job that my brother, Asya and my friend died for."

"Good luck, Mr Asano."

"And to you, Mrs Tilden."

Jason's shadow rose up to engulf him and he was gone.

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A contingent of people from two Japanese clans had arrived in Australia and settled in Asano village. First were members of the Asano clan forced out by Noriko Asano as she wrested control of the clan from her son. There were only a handful of them, being the former clan head, Shiro, and his closest family.

Shiro's daughters, Akari and Mei, had been travelling with Jason since his trip to Japan. He had sent them to Asano Village due to the clan turmoil and now had followed with the rest of their family. Jason met with Shiro, without anyone in the village being aware that he had returned.

"Thank you for seeing my daughters safe in the most trying of circumstances," Shiro said as they met in the house Shiro and his family had been assigned. It was a large home out in the bushland, surrounded by trees. "I know you lost people of your own."

"It was fortune, rather than any capability of mine," Jason said. "You should thank the Network tactical team that unravelled the trap."

"You are modest. My daughters have told me of how powerful that category four was and you fought him, face to face."

"Did they tell you I lost? It was an escape, not a victory."

"Nonetheless, Akari wants to keep helping you. She knows how important what you are doing is."

Jason shook his head.

"I've already made that mistake before. The way we will be operating now, Akari can't participate. It will just be Farrah and myself."

Shiro nodded.

"I am glad, to be honest. I know I should let my daughter make her own choices but I would rather have her close and safe. Thank you for giving us sanctuary in hard times."

"I'm honestly not so sure how secure this sanctuary is," Jason said. "Farrah is working on activating some of the stronger defences as we speak but forces are emerging that are stronger than any of us. I'm afraid of this village becoming a target."

"We will do our best to defend it, if it comes to that," Shiro said.

"I appreciate that," Jason said. "Having more silver-rankers here gives me some peace of mind."

The second contingent from Japan had arrived with the Asano clan, despite their recent conflict. The Tiwari clan's core leadership had tried to dig out those who had acted against Jason, only to find much of the clan turning against them. Playing on the unrest stirred up by Jason's interaction with the Tiwari leadership, the leadership of the Network's Kobe branch had taken advantage.

The network supported a coup by a hidden faction of the Tiwari clan, in return for information about the magic door they had been guarding for centuries. Handing the door over to an outsider had been more contentious to the clan than the patriarch has realised

and he found his entire family expelled. The two former patriarchs, Asano and Tiwari, realised they were in similar circumstances and both turned to Jason.

"They call fulfilling our ancient purpose a betrayal while selling out everything we are to the Network," the ousted patriarch explained to Jason. There were more exiled Tiwari than Asano clan members and they had been assigned to a cluster of houses in the village's beachfront area.

Koya Tiwari, Itsuki's father, also thanked Jason for bringing his son alive through such a dangerous trial.

"He is not happy that you are leaving him behind," Koya said. "I confess that I am."

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While Jason had quietly met with the exiled patriarchs, Farrah had been activating additional defences around the village. These were protections that she had put in place from the beginning but never activated due to the cost. Afterwards, as she and Jason flew away from Asano village in Shade's plane form, she discussed an issue with Jason that had come up during the activation.

"Is there a problem with the defences?" Jason asked, seeing Farrah's troubled expression.

"Just the opposite," Farrah said. "It worked too well. I was able to put the stronger defences in a semi-dormant state that consumes minimal resources, only becoming active and power-hungry as needed."

"That's great. Which makes me wonder why we didn't do it that way in the first place."

"Because we couldn't. The ambient magic was too low, even with the magic-collecting systems built into the village's infrastructure."

"You're saying that the ambient magic is rising?"

"We built those defences a year ago and since then we've had the monster waves and the transformation events. I think they are causing a more precipitous rise in the magical density than any of us realised, even Dawn."

Rainbow light burst into place in the middle of the plane, fading after an instant to reveal Dawn. Her new avatar projected a silver-rank aura.

"Miss Hurin is quite right," she said.



## Chapter 392

### Inevitability

As Jason and Farrah flew through the air in Shade's plane form, the sudden manifestation of Dawn's new silver-rank avatar took them aback, and they shot out of their chairs.

"I have some questions," Jason said to Dawn. "They can wait until you get some clothes, though."

"I apologise for the impropriety," Dawn said as Jason turned around and pulled some of Farrah's spare clothes from his inventory, handing them backwards.

"No worries," Jason said. "I know what that's all about. Waking up naked in other universes is kind of my thing. Welcome back, by the way."

"I made some enquires while I was using my true body again," Dawn said as she quickly slipped on jeans and a t-shirt. "I have something for you, next time you return to Australia."

"We've just come from there," Jason said. "We probably won't be back for a little while."

"It isn't urgent," Dawn said. "It's personal, rather than a part of our task."

"You told us you couldn't create an avatar above normal rank," Farrah said to Dawn. "I take it this new one being silver has an unfortunate connection to the rise in Earth's magical density."

"Yes," Dawn said. "Each proto-space that becomes a monster wave pushes more energy from the astral through the dimensional membrane of this world, degrading the membrane as it does. The inactivity of the grid only saw an increase in monster waves by a third, given how many go unnoticed in the depths of the oceans, but that increased activity appears to have crossed a threshold, accelerating the degradation."

"Which is triggering the transformation events," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn confirmed. "They are an unintended consequence of the original Builder's designs for this universe being affected by the rising magical density and the influx of magic through the link to the other world. It also means that I can project a more powerful avatar into your world without causing further damage."

"Does the damage done already mean that the transformation events will continue, even after we normalise the link?" Jason asked.

"It's possible," Dawn said, "but unlikely. The most probable case is that the transformation events will end once any one of the three factors is removed. Since the

intrinsic makeup of your reality and the magical density can't be undone, that leaves restoring the link to its original state, or as close as we can manage. Without surges of magic coming from your world, Miss Hurin, it should stop triggering the events."

"Does this accelerate the timeline for the destruction of Jason's world?" Farrah asked.

"Yes," Dawn said. "It will still be decades before the planet becomes uninhabitable, but even if the link is repaired on the most optimistic schedule, earth's dimensional landscape will forever be altered. Dimensional instability. There is little chance of completing the work before Earth's magical density crosses the iron-rank threshold."

"Does that mean what I think it does?" Jason asked. "Direct magical manifestation?"

"Yes," Dawn confirmed. "No more proto-spaces. Monsters, as well as essences and awakening stones, will start directly manifesting. Once that happens, repairing the link on this end will be critical to prevent even more accelerated degradation of the dimensional membrane. Additionally, once the changes to the link on this end are completed, you will have slowed things down enough that you will have years in the other world to fix the link on that side."

"Won't directly manifesting monsters be good from a safety perspective?" Farrah asked. "Instead of silver and gold-rank proto-spaces, they'll be dealing with iron-rank monsters, maybe the occasional bronze."

"I mentioned dimensional instability," Dawn said. "By that stage, the dimensional membrane of this world will be poked full of holes. There will be isolated zones of bronze, silver and possibly even gold-ranked magical density that remain permanently in place."

"Like my world," Farrah said.

"It will lean more toward the lower ranks overall than yours, but yes," Dawn said.

"My world can't handle that," Jason said.

"Yet it must," Dawn said. "What I am describing is, at this point, an inevitability."

"If gold-rank monsters just start showing up," Jason said, "we don't have the people to deal with them. They'll render whole sections of the world uninhabitable."

"Yes," Dawn said.

Jason let out a groan as he slumped back into one of the planes luxurious black chairs.

"This is getting further and further out of hand. I was meant to save the world but it just keeps getting worse and all I've accomplished is leading people I care about to their deaths."

Dawn frowned.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

“The USA,” Farrah said. “The Network is currently splitting down the middle over the its role with everything that’s going on. New alliances are being formed across old branch and geographical boundaries while the rank and file versus leadership are the new fault lines. What this adds up to is someone we worked with in Australia getting her hands on the location of the US Network’s reality core secure storage and giving it to us. That’s every reality core from every US branch, aside from the ones being experimented on or use to wake up however many gold-rankers they have.”

“We’re going to steal them,” Jason said. “The hope is that will force the Americans to go all out collecting more.”

“Meaning using their gold rankers to fight for cores in transformation zones to replenish their stocks,” Farrah clarified. “Which would give them less time to get in our way.”

“We know the information is unreliable,” Jason said. “The information made it to Australia, there’s a good chance it was planted as a trap or the leak was discovered and the cores have already been relocated. Even so, we think it’s worth the risk for the pressure it would put on the Americans and take off us.”

“Do you?” Dawn asked. “You admitted your self that the information is questionable at best. It also distracts you from your purpose. You need to examine your own motives, both of you. Is this truly the best option or is it simply the revenge you have the strength to take since you can't go after a gold-rank enemy?”

Jason looked like he’d been slapped and was about to shoot back invective before stopping himself.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered unhappily.

“No, the objective is worthwhile,” Farrah insisted.

“Yeah,” Jason said, “but is it a plausible outcome? Honestly? Dawn’s right that we aren’t thinking straight. There are too many variables.”

“I can crack any magic protection the ritualists of this world can throw out,” Farrah said.

“But can you do it while dodging all the non-magic protection?” Jason asked.

“Drones, motion sensors, biometric locks. What if it’s an underground bunker with one way in and forty silver-rankers around it? What if we carve our way through all of that – which we can’t – and the cores are already gone. The American silver-rankers might not be Adventure Society elite standard but they’re a lot better than anyone else we’ve seen here.”

“We can scout it out. Formulate a plan.”

"And how long do you spend on this operation?" Dawn asked. "Time is more critical than ever."

"I just..."

Farrah clenched her fists in front of her.

"...I just really want to kill someone for what they did."

"I know."

"Do you?" Farrah asked testily, rousing an angry expression from Jason.

"Yes, Farrah, I do. It was my brother. My girlfriend. My childhood friend. You think every fibre of my being isn't baying for blood? My family are still living inside my soul and they're scared because the sky is red and every single thing in there is razor-sharp."

Jason's aura came pouring out in an angry wave, crashing over Farrah before he forcibly reined it in.

"I'm sorry," Farrah said faintly. "I shouldn't have said that."

Jason nodded.

"We're both on edge. I say some stupid things at the best of times."

"You should redirect your destination," Dawn said. "Start looking for the next node."

"No need," Jason said wearily. "We're already on course. The next place we need to look is in a sandwich."

"What?" Dawn asked.

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"You're an idiot," Dawn said as she, Jason and Farrah emerged from a shop called the brown jug in Sandwich, Massachusetts, with a large bag of sandwiches.

"What?" Jason asked. "So, they don't capitalise the name of their shop. These sandwiches still look pretty good."

"They do look quite good," Farrah agreed.

"And how often do you get to eat a sandwich in a sandwich?" Jason asked. "The concept itself is like a sandwich."

"Please stop saying sandwich," Dawn said.

In the time it had taken them to reach Cape Cod, the Network had already set up operations and breached the aperture that Jason and Farrah were targeting. For this reason, they had decided to wait for them to wind down after killing the anchor monster.

With how thin the Network was stretched at the current time, they would not be as thorough about sweeping proto-spaces for loot and Jason was going to wait for them to go in and out before making his own intrusion. Even if there was little time left, Jason's ability would extend the stability of the space.

That left the trio meandering down the streets of Sandwich, eating what Dawn was forced to acknowledge was a pretty good sandwich. Wandering by the town pond, Jason found an unobserved spot to let his family out of the spirit vault where they had spent weeks in isolation with very few reprieves. He hadn't even risked letting them out for Kaito's funeral service and their time in his spirit vault had grown less pleasant in the time since Kaito's death. Jason might be able to hide it on the outside but his rage and shame were made manifest for the people living inside his soul to see. A summer outing in Cape Cod was a blessed relief.

"How many awful sandwich jokes has Jason made?" Erika asked as Jason handed out food from the bag.

"All of them, as far as I can tell," Farrah complained.

"I'm eating a sandwich in Sandwich," Jason said. "How can I not make a meal out of that?"

"I stand corrected," Farrah complained.

Erika watched her brother. His eyes that weren't really laughing and the smiles that didn't turn the corners of his mouth quite the way they should. She had seen him at his lowest and knew that for all he had changed, for all his power, there were still dark holes into which he could descend. She wasn't sure if the façade he was putting up was healthy but at least he was trying. She remembered the times when he hadn't been.

As they had an impromptu picnic on the grass, Erika pointed a nervous Emi toward her uncle, standing alone as he stared out over the water.

"You need to tell him," Erika said.

"Can't you do it?"

"No," Erika told her daughter. "You have to take responsibility for your own choices."

Emi had a hesitant path to Jason, slipping her hand into his. He smiled sadly as he continued to stare out at nothing.

"Uncle Jason."

"Yes, Moppet."

"I... don't think I want to fight like you do. I don't want to be an adventurer."

Jason turned to look at his niece, looking back with fearful eyes. Jason crouched down, gave her his first unabashedly happy grin in a long time and swept her up in a hug.

"After Uncle Kai," she explained as Jason continued to hold her tight, "I don't think I want to kill things."

"Good," he said.

"You're not disappointed?"

"Not even a little bit," he said. "You have to do what you want to do, Moppet. Not what you think I want you to do."

"But you spent so much time training me. You even took me out of school."

Jason let go of the hug and held her by the shoulders, locking eyes with her to convey his sincerity.

"You think that was a waste? You got lots of exercise, learned self-discipline and magic. What's wrong with that?"

"Does this mean I have to stop learning magic?"

"Don't be silly," Jason said, tussling her hair. "The other world has a whole Magic Society, you know that. Farrah's already a member. They'll be ecstatic to get a brilliant young lady like you on the books."

"I can still go to the other world?"

"I need you where I can keep you safe, Moppet. I have friends I can trust there."

Jason felt lighter as he let his niece walk him back to the group. He knew there was a lot of himself in her and was happy that she wouldn't insist on following his path and paying the price it cost to walk it. Even so, he would see her trained properly. He knew that he likely had a little Clive on his hands and she would inevitably want to explore a world full of mystery and magic. He would make sure she was ready.

Jason's family were only out a short time, for the sake of caution, before returning to the spirit vault. Farrah went with them, so she could be carried into the proto-space with Jason. When he entered a proto-space alone, he didn't even need an aperture. They had only used apertures in the past to let the rest of the team in but Jason was not going to do that again.

The reason he hadn't directly entered proto-spaces in the past was that he needed space and uninterrupted time to conduct the rituals that would help him find the next node. This had been the main role of the team and their absence would make things harder, especially without Greg and his excellent zoning abilities. Now, half the team was dead and Jason would no longer risk anyone else. That left no reason to use apertures and deal with the Network.

Shade had been keeping an eye on the Network's operation, notifying Jason as it wound down and they withdrew. They even sealed the aperture back up to avoid mishaps, leaving only a pair of guards behind at the aperture site.

Jason took that as his opportunity to enter, picking a spot well away from any essence users he could sense due to his inability to hide his aura while transitioning through the dimensional boundary.

Jason let his aura blend into the ambient magic until he felt almost indistinguishable from the world around him. As he reached what felt like a oneness with the universe, his body blurred and vanished as he slipped through the membrane of reality. He let Farrah out of the spirit vault immediately on arriving in the otherworldly space. It was a primordial realm of rocky terrain, turgid water, stunted plants and hot, heavy air.

“That was weird from the inside,” she told him. “It was like your whole soul garden suddenly expanded off into the horizon for a moment. There was this strange sense of being connected to the whole of reality. Is that’s what it’s like for you?”

“I’d more describe it as tingly,” Jason said.

“Tingly?”

“Yep.”

“You have the soul of a poet.”

“Didn’t you just say I had the soul of a connectedness to all things?”

“Just shut up and get on with saving the world.”

Jason and Farrah had been forced to devise new approaches to making sure the ritual was not interfered with by wandering monsters. What they came up with was a trio of solutions, the use of each being predicated on the strength of the proto-space. The first option was for low-ranking proto-spaces where the monsters were weak. In such cases, Jason would just blast out his aura at full strength and range, which would scare off any low-ranked monsters. Farrah would mop up the monsters that still approached.

The next approach was for more powerful proto-spaces where the monsters could pose a potential threat. In this case, Jason would still project his aura, but modulated to seem weak and vulnerable. Then he would open up a can of afflictions on the would-be predators and let butterflies of doom deal with them, clearing out a large enough space for Jason to work.

The final approach was for the strongest, gold-rank proto-spaces, should they run into one. If possible, they would avoid them altogether, with alternate avenues being worth more than the risk of being eaten.

Whatever the approach, Farrah’s role was playing cleanup and intercepting any monsters that still wandered by. It wasn’t as reliable as having a team patrol the zone, but even if there were some interruptions, they were confident they could make it work. In this particular instance, they were lucky in that the Network had abandoned it and the monsters were low-ranked. It was only the first of many times they would go through the process, but this time, at least, it went off without a hitch.

## Chapter 393

### The Edge of Madness

Jason, Farrah and Dawn travelled from place to place, in search of nodes to repair. They used the grid interface in the cloud house to choose their next destinations, refining their accuracy as they learned more from each proto-space and node they explored. After the USA was Canada, Tanzania, Myanmar and more.

They lived an isolated life, along with Jason's family, as people meant nothing but danger. Seeking help from others was exposing vulnerabilities, while those who genuinely willing to help would themselves be in danger by association.

Their methodology would start by using the cloud house's grid interface to detect a suitable target area, then travel there and set up the cloud house as a home base. This allowed Jason's family to safely live outside of Jason's spirit vault, which was slowly becoming less inhospitable but was still far from welcoming.

Once they arrived in a region, Jason and Farrah would wait for proto-spaces to form, in order to go in and identify the right node. They became increasingly proficient at the sequence of entering a space, performing the ritual and getting out before the Network was any the wiser. When possible, they covered any trace of the rituals, hoping to keep the Network unaware of their patterns.

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The current lifestyle of Jason and the others afforded a lot of downtime as they travelled or waited on proto-spaces to manifest. Jason and Farrah took the time to maintain a regimented training schedule, which was not always possible when things were busier. Farrah had constructed a new set of exercise equipment for their heightened attributes, as any non-magical weights heavy enough to be valuable were too heavy to be practical.

Other time was spend on magical theory. Dawn continued to teach Jason while Emi learned from Farrah. After making her decision not to follow her uncle, Emi had been reinvigorated, going as far as choosing a magical specialty. Farrah advised against making the choice too quickly, wanting her to see the breadth of options the other world had to offer.

"Fortunately, thirteen-year-olds are famous for taking good advice when presented with it," an exasperated Farrah told Jason while they were doing their physical training, which made him laugh.

"What is it that she wants to learn?" he asked.



"It's a very niche field related to mine," Farrah explained. "I'm a specialist in formation magic and arrays. Permanent and semi-permanent versions of ritual magic, which is one of the core magical fields. It's less specialised than, say, astral magic, which is why I have a broader knowledge base than you're developing, able to tap into a lot of areas."

"Okay."

"What Emi is looking at is a specialised version of my field called formation interactivity. You understand that putting magical formations close together is tricky because they interfere with each other, right?"

"Yeah," Jason said.

"Formation interactivity is the study of the effects of having formations close to one another. At a basic level, it's about reducing the effects so that formations can be used in closer proximity. Advanced applications involve generating positive interactions but that is not a developed area of study. It's also notorious for being one of the most impenetrable branches of magic, which is why it's underdeveloped."

"And my niece has got it into her head to be a groundbreaker," Jason said.

"She's implausibly smart, I'll admit," Farrah said. "Even so, that field is a career. If that's the way she wants to go, she wouldn't have time to be an adventurer. That's locking yourself in a room and never coming out research."

"I assume your intention is to keep working on her foundational skills until you get her into a Magic Society branch and broaden her horizons?"

"That's exactly my intention. My concern is that she's as stubborn and unpredictable as you and your sister."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Jason said.

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While the cloud house life was largely isolated from the world, the internet was a window into what they were missing. There was always at least one online news feed running somewhere and as weeks passed they became increasingly happy to be missing it all. As they hid away, quietly completing their tasks, the world was ever more precipitously teetering on the edge of madness.

"Is that a centaur?" Jason asked, glancing at a wall monitor after emerging from the showers post-workout.

"No," Farrah said, likewise emerging. "It's a lot of centaurs."

"I know Salzburg has an old-world charm," Jason said, "but there weren't centaurs around when we were in Austria, right?"

"There were," Dawn said. "Like other members of the Cabal, they have become experts at hiding their presence over the centuries."

"They'd have to," Jason said. "You can't hide being half-horse with a pair of extra-loose slacks. My friend Craig once told me that all Cabal members can pass as human, shape-change into humans or otherwise have the means to remain hidden from the world. Usually a combination of illusion powers and isolation. Hillfolk, haunted houses, mysterious things in the woods and so on."

"That's an incomplete but sufficient description," Dawn said.

"Where do creatures like that come from?" Farrah asked. "The Cabal has always struck me as odd. How does a low-magic world have such overtly magical creatures? It hasn't even developed non-human essence-using species."

"Like so many of this world's issues," Dawn said, "It stems from the same original sin."

"Original sin?" Jason asked. "Are you going native on me, Dawn?"

"The connotations of the term are usefully descriptive," Dawn said. "It goes back to the way the original Builder constructed the seed of this universe using the patterns of existing worlds. There is a reason the other great astral beings intervened. This world is now ravaged by the ramifications of that choice while yours, Miss Hurin, is also being affected. Soon, it will also experience the consequences of the Builder's experiment in full force."

"Which we're going to unleash," Farrah said unhappily.

"You have to cut someone to perform surgery," Jason said. "If there's a better option, you take it, but sometimes there just isn't."

"Just so," Dawn agreed.

"So, the Cabal members are echoes of the worlds the original Builder based this on," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn confirmed. "Even before the magic started to rise, beings started to arise from the incongruities that resulted from the unconventional means by which your universe was established. It was rare, but over hundreds, thousands, millions of years they slowly emerged. Like other living things, they evolved. From simple magical entities to complex beings, they adapted to their environments over countless generations while still being shaped by their origins. Because they were rare, even with the power they possessed, those that adapted to remain hidden are the ones that survived."

"So, they really are connected to the transformation spaces," Farrah said.

“After a fact, yes,” Dawn said. “All magical things will grow stronger over time as the ambient magic rises. Part of the reason that earth’s essence users are mediocre is that most of them spend most of their time suffering low-level magical starvation. These transformation zones seem to affect Cabal members even more than the rising ambient magic.”

“Which is why they’re winning out in the competition for reality cores,” Jason said. “The transformation zones they’re fighting in make them stronger.”

“If the Cabal is looking to revive a bunch of ancient vampires, isn’t that bad?” Farrah asked.

“I’m pretty sure it is, yeah,” Jason said. “There nothing we can do about it, though, except to keep doing what we’re doing. We’re two people, not an army that can run around competing for cores all over the world.”

“Exactly,” Dawn said. “It is wise to focus on what you can do and not concern yourself with what you cannot.”

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The first node Jason successfully identified and repaired, right before fighting the gold ranker, turned out to be one of the ones they needed to find. The process wasn’t always reliable, with the nodes in the USA and Myanmar being false positives that didn’t need repairing. The only gains were that with each failed node, they would be better at eliminating further false positives as they refined the process of identifying further nodes. The nodes in Canada and Tanzania had been modified and Jason managed to rectify both.

As they worked, the descent into chaos that began with monster waves and transformation events started to escalate. In just a few weeks, things had grown increasingly worse as sections of major cities started to be caught up in transformation zones.

The Bankstown area of Sydney was turned into a city of low-level volcanic activity and stone buildings. The people there were primarily turned into the smoulder race, with onyx skin and glowing, fiery eyes. The area affected included Bankstown airport, which was the Sydney Network branch’s major transport and logistics hub. Not only did the Network’s non-essence user staff get transformed but their planes were turned into bird-like magical constructs. This rendered them inoperable without an essence user with the ability to use specialised magical tools, an ability that rarely appeared on Earth.

Earth had taken a magitech route, combining technology with magic. In terms of accessibility, convenience and cost, this was objectively better than relying on purely

magical devices. Magitech communication was much more convenient and vehicles didn't require someone like Clive with a special power to operate.

Pallimustus also had vehicles that could be driven by anyone but only operable in zones of high magical density. Only something like the vortex accumulator in Jason's cloud constructs could circumvent this problem, which was a level of magic engineering undeveloped on Earth. Magitech was much more suited to earth's conditions and advanced in different directions.

Bankstown airport was now covered in stone buildings, lava pooling in random areas and a bunch of giant metal birds that couldn't move. This hurt the Sydney network branch, especially as they joined a growing movement actively working against the Network's global leadership.

Three factions quickly emerged: The Chinese branches and those who allied with them, forcibly or not; the USA, who did not accept allies, and most of what was left. This faction was the largest, but also the most scattered and least stable. The people attached to the International Committee split rather evenly between the three factions.

The first two factions were focused heavily on claiming reality cores and accordingly became open rivals. The third faction took the name the Network had publicly been using, the Global Defense Network, and continued to intercept proto spaces. What they did do was change the American spelling of 'defense' and change it to the international 'defence.' Most government bodies continued to work with this faction, providing much-needed legitimacy and support.

Sometimes the transformation events were relatively peaceful, although this was rare. Coconut Grove in Miami, Florida was transformed into an elven utopia, with beautiful architecture interwoven with rich, sprawling gardens. The residents were transformed into beautiful elves which, while still traumatic, could have been far worse.

More common were cases like West Canfield, Detroit. The people were turned into goblins and their homes into underground warrens, which rapidly devolved into a lawless combat zone into which the National Guard was sent to restore order. After the first hideous former humans were gunned down, things devolved quickly.

Transformation zones fluctuated in area, from one or two kilometres across to engulfing entire large towns. Less-developed areas, like farms and countryside, tended to have larger areas affected, while events in cities were more contained. Despite the smaller scale, though, once major cities were impacted, it was as if an invisible line between stability and chaos had been crossed.

Conflict between the magical factions become more heated and harder to hide from the population at large. As open battle spilled out of the transformation zones, the people of the world realised that a war was being fought and that their only parts were innocent bystander or collateral damage. EOA superheroes fought the essence users of the Network, who themselves were caught up in infighting.

Driving the escalation was the knowledge that with each passing day, the mythological beings of the Cabal were growing in power as they operated more and more in the open. Centaurs, ogres, fairies and more variously delighted and horrified as they were spotted by the media and had their images revealed to the world.

The Cabal would have been dominating already except that, like the Network, current events had revealed old fault lines in their organisation. Factional infighting abounded as conflicts older than any living civilisation were taken up once more.

Government forces stepped in as best they were able as cities rapidly turned into battlegrounds. Government-Network alliances were strained or broken, which was often the best-case scenario. In China and the US, Network Deep State actors rapidly seized control.

The Global Defence Network faction did their best to hold everything together. The other Network factions were focused on their conflicts with each other, the EOA and the cabal as they fought over reality cores, allowing the GDN to claim the grid infrastructure and continue to intercept proto-spaces. Rapidly forming new agreements with world governments, they avoided the reality core war. The biggest problem was that many of their silver-rank personnel had been pulled into other factions, making higher-rank dimensional incursions difficult and dangerous to handle.

Emergency powers were enacted and martial law was put into place. The cities, which had been largely shielded from the monster waves, were now battlegrounds and people were fleeing into rural areas to escape the fighting. Jason, meanwhile, continued his work as weeks turned into months. At the same time he arrived in his latest location, Venezuela, the ancient vampires the non-Cabal factions had been worrying about made their presence known in the city of Venice.

## Chapter 394

### Trying to Be Merciful

In Venezuela, Jason identified and repaired another node. He was starting to get used to the process and had gotten the time required down to under an hour. After leaving the node space, he opened a portal back to the cloud house, currently disguised as a complex of hastily-erected prefab buildings in the mountain town of Galipan.

Close to Caracas, Galipan had long been a tourist staple but was rapidly turning into a refuge for mid-level government and military officials from Caracas and La Guaira. After a transformation event triggered open battle between the magical factions, many low-to-mid-level authority figures had immediately looked to escape.

Galipan had been overlooked by the upper-level officials, allowing the middling people to move in and force the locals out, claiming the inns and residences for themselves. The new prefab buildings were assembled for their support staff, not the displaced locals.

Jason's family had been laying low in the cloud house as Jason and Farrah once more went through a series of proto-spaces to pinpoint the right node. Dawn remained with the cloud house to intercept any danger, now that she possessed a silver-rank avatar.

No one left the cloud house other than Jason and Farrah. A bunch of foreigners would not be out of place back when it was a tourist village but now they would stick out like a sore thumb. They were all caught up watching the news from around the world as order continued to deteriorate.

Cities fell under martial law or became outright battle zones with soldiers fighting essence-users fighting superheroes fighting all manner of strange creatures. Channel after channel, news site after news site showed the world descending into disaster and unrest.

"...the 'puppet presidency' riots continue in many major US cities, with the new administration's attempts to mobilise the National Guard in response meeting resistance from some state governors..."

"...spokesperson stated that there was no internal strife in the CCP after the recent leadership changes, but with China's media blackout continuing, there is no way to know the true state of..."

"...infighting within the Global Defence Network has been blamed for the new monster surge in the small island nation..."

The family all sat together in the lounge room, watching as the world fell apart.

"It's like watching the end of the world," Erika's husband Ian said as Jason, Farrah and Dawn returned to the cloud house.

"That's what we're trying to avoid," Jason said and his family turned to look at the returning trio.

"How did it go?" Jason's father Ken asked.

"Another one down," Jason said. "Time to pack up and move on."

"Not quite," Dawn said. "There is still one more thing to deal with."

"What's that?" Jason asked, then tilted his head as if trying to hear something in the distance.

"Oh," he said as something entered the range of his aura senses, moving fast. "I'll take care of it."

"What is it?" Farrah asked.

"Some EOA lackeys," Jason said. "We've had a good run but someone was bound to find us eventually and the EOA is working with the government here."

"Why would the EOA go after you?" Farrah asked. "I thought North wanted you to do what you're doing."

"So he said," Jason told her. "Could be he was lying. Could be that he wants to test my ability to affect Builder magic after absorbing the door. Most likely is that he just hasn't told his organisation anything about it."

"What if his organisation ends up stopping you?" Farrah asked.

"Then Jason was never strong enough to get the job done anyway," Dawn said, then turned to Jason. "Deal with them and then we can depart."

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A full twenty superheroes in matching pseudo-military outfits flew through the air, soaring up the mountain. As they closed in on the town of Galipan they slowed down and released a camera drone, in accordance with League of Heroes media protocols. They made their approach to the town low and slow, making sure the people there had the chance to notice them and to pull out their phones. The flying superhumans paused, hovering over the town and the new expanse of prefab constructions.

"Which one is it?" one of them asked their leader. "Should we start searching them?"

"No need," the leader said, nodding in a certain direction. The others looked, seeing a figure flying slowly towards them. It had a cloak of void black, spread out like wings, over a robe the colour of dark, dried blood. From within the cloak's hood was a pair of silver eyes that shone like starlight, while two blue and orange orb-eyes floated around him.

“Jason Asano,” the leader announced loudly, making sure his voice would be picked up on phone cameras. He spoke in English, which told Jason that this was all for the publicity.

“I am Autoridad,” the leader announced. “We are taking you and your associates into custody.”

Hovering in the air, the heroes spread out in a semi-circle around Jason. Jason’s wing cloak held him up and he looked almost like he was underwater as his cloak floated around him. The heroes had more sober and sensible outfits than their US counterparts, with their costumes bearing a militaristic and authoritarian style. The Venezuelan flag prominently on display. Venezuela was a country that had ousted the Network in favour of the EOA and their superheroes, an arrangement that was holding even through the current chaos.

“How much do you know about the process that gave you’re your extraordinary abilities?” Jason asked. “Did you know that the earlier, weaker versions of the process had a habit of turning people insane? The reason your generation doesn’t is that there is something inside you called a clockwork cor—”

“We aren’t here to listen to you Asano,” Autoridad cut him off. “Surrender or don’t.”

“I’m trying to explain why coming after me is a bad idea,” Jason said. “I’m trying to be merciful. I don’t know what will happen when—”

Jason was cut off again as eyebeams blasted from Autoridad in his direction. One of the orbs around Jason became a shield of force, rippling like water as it intercepted the blast.

“Look, banana republic General Zod,” Jason said. “This is your chance to walk away. Fly away, whatever. Please take it.”

“You essence magicians all think yourselves so powerful. You mentioned the weaker versions of us that came before. You know that they can boost their strength, yes? You may be arrogant enough to think that you’re stronger than all of us, but we now have a boost strong enough to work on us. Using the power of reality cores, we can become far more powerful than you.”

“Why are you the only one who gets to monologue? I thought I was the villain, here, superhero.”

Autoridad reached for an injector pen in a sheath on his belt.

“Don’t do it,” Jason warned.

Autoridad ignored Jason and grabbed the injector pen. Then he dropped it as he and all the other superheroes simultaneously started having seizures and fell from the sky.



They landed hard on the street below as people filming with their phones scattered out of the way. Jason floated down into the midst of the fallen heroes who continued to twitch on the ground.

Jason's cloak vanished as he alighted upon the ground, revealing an unconcerned face to the people filming him as he panned his gaze over the heroes. Silver liquid seeped out of their tear ducts as their twitching seizures come to a stop, along with their lives.

"So that's what happens," Jason muttered absently. Leveraging his soul attack was apparently quite effective against clockwork cores, due to the effect absorbing the door had on his ability to affect the Builder's magic. How it would fare against star seeds he didn't know but was looking forward to finding out.

The town was silent, people moving out of his way as he ignored them, walking over to one of the buildings. His family stepped out of it and he started absorbing the building into his cloud flask.

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Once more flying over the ocean in Shade's plane form, Jason, Farrah and Dawn were in a small conference cabin, discussing their next destination.

"After refining the search parameters with the details from the last node," Farrah said, "we've got two viable target regions to search for the next. One is in Australia, the other in Europe."

"I would like to go home," Jason said. "I know the village has been kept out of everything we've seen on the news but I'd still like to check on it. There's also whatever mysterious thing Dawn arranged for us while she was between avatars."

"The question is Europe," Farrah said. "Venice had been entirely taken over by vampires. Are they looking to establish a safe haven for themselves and that's the end of it or is this just the beginning? Should we go now, before things get worse or give it time and wait for things to settle?"

Jason absently tapped a finger to his lips as he considered.

"Craig Vermillion suggested there's a lot more of these old vampires than we've seen," he said. "Especially in Europe. I think I'd prefer to know what we're walking into, even if it's bad, rather than be caught up in some kind of vampiric uprising."

"If we were," Farrah said, "maybe we could make a difference."

"We are making a difference," Jason said. "The sooner we cut off the reality core supply, the sooner the vampires go back in their box."

“Those cores aren’t like spirit coins,” Dawn said. “It will take time before they are consumed. Once the Cabal rouses their vampires, it will be some time before they return to slumber.”

“All the more reason to get this done, Jason said.

“We have had distraction enough,” Dawn agreed. “We are trying to help this entire world, not just some of the people on it.”

“Australia it is, then,” Farrah said. “Maybe it’s time to explain what you arranged for us. You said it was personal.”

“I’ll explain after Mr Asano’s sister is done with him,” Dawn said. “You and I should give them some privacy.”

There was an angry hammering on the cabin door and they could all sense Erika’s aura on the other side of it. Dawn and Farrah left the cabin, letting Erika in. Erika marched in and tossed a computer tablet on the table, paused on a video.

Jason didn’t ask, instead, reaching out to unpause the tablet.

“...disturbing footage and viewer discretion is advised. It would appear that the world’s first superhero has gone full villain, killing an entire team of Venezuela’s superheroes. The Venezuelan government have released a statement saying that this will impact their ability to prevent monster waves...”

Jason paused the video again and met his sister’s glare with a blank expression.

“What is it, Erika?” he asked softly.

“You’re just killing people on the news, now?”

“Yes.”

“What is my daughter meant to make of that, Jason? You know how much she looks up to you. She was scared of telling you that she didn’t want to go fight monsters with you and now she sees you slaughtering people on television?”

“Did they have the audio of that footage? They weren’t just coming for me, Erika. They were coming for all of us. I won’t let that happen. Not again.”

“And what? You’ll kill whoever it takes to make that happen?”

“Yes.”

Erika had been turned from angry to unsettled at the quiet determination with which Jason answered her questions.

“You were worried about the things you’ve done changing you,” she said.

“Yes.”

“You were right to be.”

With a worried look at her brother, Erika left the cabin.

"I know," Jason whispered to the empty room.

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Craig Vermillion drove a small powerboat over Sydney Harbour, approaching a larger vessel and pulling up alongside. He tied off his own boat and hopped lightly from one to the other.

The larger boat was a modified fishing boat, to which a powerful chain winch had been affixed for dragging heavy objects up from the depths. Craig made his way past the crew, human minions of the cabal, and into the captain's cabin.

"Craig," the man inside greeted, getting up to shake Vermillion's hand.

"Franklin."

Craig looked at a large crystal bottle on the table, held securely in a foam-lined box. Inside the bottle was a purplish liquid.

"Is that it?" Craig asked.

"It is," Franklin said.

"Literal blue blood."

"I don't know how they make it," Franklin said. "I got a glimpse of one of their magic rocks. I'd rather be well out of all this, to be frank. Which I am."

"Still with that joke, Frank? You've been telling it for, what? Forty, fifty years? Has anyone ever laughed?"

"It's not really the time for laughter, is it?"

"Not an excuse, Frank," Craig said, then his shoulders slumped. "You know, if you don't want to be part of this, you don't have to be."

"I'm not one for rebellion, Craig."

"It doesn't have to be rebellion. You can just get out, let it all blow over."

"Do you really think that's going to happen?"

"The reality cores will only last so long," Craig said, gesturing at the bottle of modified blood. "Once they can't make any more of this, the old ones will go back to sleep."

"Assuming that your boy Asano somehow manages to undo all this mess."

"He will."

"He's one man. He's powerful, but compared to the old ones? We already know he lost to his own group's essence magician. This is the way things are, now, Craig. We need to compete."

"It doesn't have to be an arms race."

"Yeah, Craig. It does."

Vermillion sighed.

"I'm going," he said. "If I can't stop it, at least I won't be a party to it."

"You may come to regret that, Craig."

"When you're as old as us, Frank, regret is an inevitability."

"I suppose it is."

Franklin took out a memory stick and held it out for Craig.

"A list of safe houses and supply caches I don't think are on the books," Franklin explained. "No guarantees, though, so keep your eyes sharp. Security codes and protocols are all in there."

"They won't be happy if they know you gave me this."

"Then don't tell them."

Craig took the stick with a laugh and shook his friend's hand again.

"Good luck, Frank"

"You too."

"Are you sure you won't come with me?"

"Get going, Craig. You want to be long gone when we wake this guy up."

Craig went back to his boat and took off. He took the battery out of his phone and threw them into the harbour. Behind him, the huge chain winch on the boat stirred into rumbling, diesel-powered action. Craig and his boat were nowhere to be seen by the time it hoisted what looked like a stone sarcophagus from the water.

## Chapter 395

### Appreciation

In Asano Village, a portal arch quietly rose up inside a house. Cheryl Asano, Jason's mother, froze as if time had stopped. She had seen little of her youngest son since his return from apparent death, except on the news. She hadn't seen him at all since her eldest son followed him out into an increasingly mad world, only to return as a corpse. She had only seen his famous portal a handful of times in person. Like most people in Australia, she had seen it on the news as thousands of Broken Hill residents escaped through it to safety. She had watched everything she could find online about her son over and over again.

She gulped as her son stepped through the portal, his expression slightly surprised to find his mother standing right in front of him.

"Hello, Mother."

"Jason, I..." She trailed off, not knowing how to begin.

"Hold that thought," he said as Erika and Emi emerged from the portal. Neither had seen her since Kaito's death and, unlike Jason, immediately moved to hug her.

"I'm going to quietly go round people up," Jason said. "Mother, we're using your place as a gathering point because it's more discreet. I don't know how many people are the eyes and ears of outsiders."

"Jason..." she began but his shadow rose up, he stepped into it and was gone.

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Jason found Taika in the village's main security office and happily grabbed the big man in a huge hug.

"I'm sorry about your bro, bro."

"Thanks, mate."

Jason had originally intended to take Taika as part of the team travelling with him, only to change his mind. He had not wanted to entirely deprive the village of people he could trust and rely on. Given that Taika would likely be dead otherwise, he was relieved at how it worked out.

"Bro, I saw you killing those superhero guys with your mind. They say you're a proper supervillain now but if the other guys are all dressed like tin-pot dictators, that pretty much makes you the good guy."

"You don't think I'm bad for killing all those people?"

"They came for you and yours, bro. Put 'em down hard and don't look back."

Jason knew that for all his jovial personality, Taika had seen dark days long before Jason came along. He didn't know the details but he knew Taika had left New Zealand to escape dangerous circumstances. Taika had become familiar with the cruelty and fickleness of death long before Jason.

“Taika, I need you to round up some people in the village and take them to my mother’s place.”

“What do I tell them when they ask why?”

“That it’s mandatory and you don’t know. Don’t mention me at all. Some of them will probably react poorly.”

“No worries, mate,” Taika assured him. “I got you.”

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Jason was very good at hiding any kind of nervousness or uncertainty, both in his body language and his aura. He was visibly anxious as he sensed a group of people approach his mother’s front door.

They were the last to arrive by design, Jason having asked Taika to bring them last. There was no shortage of people present already, crowding even the generous, open-plan space of his mother’s house. Already arrived were Amy and her daughters, too young to understand what was going on. The Japanese Asano sisters and Itsuki were both present, as were the family of Jason’s deceased friend Greg. They had known Jason since he was a young teenager but now looked at him like a stranger. Between who and what Jason had become and the death of their son, Jason could feel the distrust and hostility in their auras plain and clear.

Jason was anticipating worse from the people Taika was leading to the door. The Karadeniz family, Asya’s parents and siblings, were taken aback as they saw all the people. When they spotted Jason amongst them, their expressions went dark.

“Mr and Mrs Karadeniz—”

The long legs of Asya’s mother let her stride across the room in just a few steps, loudly slapping Jason across the face. Jason had nothing to say, bowing his head the way he had before Greg’s family. He felt that his eyes should be welling with tears but that was not something his body did anymore. It had been years since Jason had been a human but he had never felt as inhuman as at that moment.

“Why are we here?” Asya’s father asked in a hostile voice.

Jason nodded absently, more to himself than anyone else.

“I have some friends who have afforded us a unique opportunity,” Jason said. “One that has, to my knowledge, never been afforded to anyone else on earth.”

“What kind of opportunity?” Greg’s father asked.

“One for comfort, I hope,” Jason said as he raised a portal. “Please all go through.”

“You seriously expect us to go through that?” Asya’s mother asked.

“If you choose not to, I understand,” Jason said. “If that is your decision, I won’t tell you what you missed. I don’t want you carrying that regret for the rest of your life.”

“Why not just tell us what’s through there right now?” Asya’s father asked.

“Because I don’t think you’ll believe me,” Jason said. “Even if you do, I’m worried about misunderstandings if you don’t see it for yourself.”

“Don’t play games,” Greg’s father said. “You’ve always liked playing games, Jason, but I won’t stand for it.”

“That’s right,” Asya’s father said. “What is on the other side of your magic door, Asano?”

Jason stared at him, hollow-eyed, for a long time.

“Your daughter,” he said finally. “Go through or not. All I’m offering you is the choice.”

“What are you—”

Shade rose out of Jason’s shadow. Jason stepped into him and was gone.

“Mum, are you crazy?” Asya’s brother asked. “He killed a bunch of people with his brain. That was two days ago.”

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Jason used his ability to shadow jump between Shade’s bodies to avoid using up the energy of his portal. He appeared next to the other side of the portal, which was some twenty kilometres offshore from Asano village, atop a tower at the centre of his cloud palace.

Jason had finally used the palace configuration of his cloud flask. It produced a sprawling construct, floating on the surface of the Pacific as ocean waves failed to so much as make it shudder. It was solid as an island but smaller than the palace form Emir preferred as Jason usually deployed his cloud constructs in their adaptive forms.

The adaptive form offered both protection against search magic and camouflaged against direct observation. The palace was made up entirely in shades of blue and white that, from a satellite, would be indistinguishable from the water around it.

Even in the adaptive form, the palace was still sprawling and huge. A series of concentric rings made up the four-storey buildings, connected by covered, open-air walkways like the spokes of a wheel. At the hub of the wheel was an eight-storey tower with a flat rooftop designed as a lookout. This was where the portal emerged, the salty ocean wind blowing over it in spite of the elevation.

Jason waited, knowing that a discussion was taking place in his absence. Having finally admitted to himself that he was not as capable of moving people to act as he had once thought himself, he had left Erika and Emi to be his ambassadors. Even his short display with Greg and Asya's families showed him that he would only make things worse. To Jason's surprise, when someone finally came through the portal it was Asya's father.

"Asano, what do you mean by saying my daughter is..."

His words dropped away as he noticed the floating palace around him, the beautiful building made of clouds spread out before him. More people came through, spreading out along the balustrade that circled the tower roof and goggling at the palace. Erika moved over to stand beside her brother, hooking her arm into his elbow as they looked out at the palace below and the ocean beyond.

"You once told me that you came back to show me wonders," she said. "With all the horrors that magic has brought, it's easy to forget the marvels."

"I thought I would be the only magical thing in this world," Jason said. "I wish I'd been right."

There was a huge elevating platform in the centre of the flat tower rooftop and Jason directed everyone onto it. He could have opened the portal directly to their destination but he had wanted to prime them to witness the extraordinary. For that reason, he led them on a meandering path through the palace, picking up Ken, Hiro and Yumi along the way.

The interior of the Palace was more colourful than the disguised exterior, with the glorious sunset colours that were cloud construct default. It was also filled with the plants Jason had harvested during his long stay in the jungle astral space of the Order of the Reaper, with lush green leaves and vibrant flowers. Since they were all non-magical plants, just feeding enough plant, earth and water quintessence to the cloud flask allowed it to maintain them. The jungle plants gave the palace a lush, tropical feel, complete with rich, fresh aromas.

The group had lost any notion of interrogating Jason for the moment as they toured the wondrous space until Jason brought them to a vast and empty chamber. It was circular in shape, with a ceiling high above them. The only things in the room were Dawn, Farrah and three of Shade's bodies. Each instance of Shade was standing in the middle of a hellishly complex ritual circle, all in a row. There was a fourth, empty ritual circle, positioned behind the line of three that Shade occupied. All four circles were piled high with spirit coins of all ranks, with even a diamond coin in each one.



"I'm sure you have all seen my companion, Shade," Jason said. Shade was, indeed, a well-known figure, even having been interviewed once when Jason allowed a media junket in Asano Village.

"What you may not know that that Shade's progenitor – his father, if you will – is an entity that governs the souls of the dead."

This caused a stir in the group, Jason sensing grief, anger and disbelief in their auras.

"This," Jason said while gesturing with his arm, "is Dawn. She is a deeply remarkable person, not just for her origins and power but for her kindness. Recently she took the time to contact Shade's father in order to give us all a gift. I don't even know what price she paid for this gift, as she refuses to tell us. Suffice to say, I am quite certain it was great."

"What are you talking about, Asano?" Asya's father asked. His shock at their surroundings was wearing off and his patience with it. "If this is some kind of nonsensical séance..."

"That's exactly what it is," Jason said. "What we have for you here is an opportunity that so many lost in grief can only helplessly wish for: a final chance to say goodbye."

As he sensed the sceptical affront rising from the group, Jason marched to the middle of the empty ritual circle and opened up a portal. This was not a normal portal, despite the identical look, but a medium for the ritual magic Dawn had put in place. It was an intricate work of magic far beyond Jason and Farrah's capabilities. He had been very careful crossing the sophisticated magic diagram, so as not to disturb it.

Dark streams of power flowed from Jason's portal into the shadowy forms at the centre of the other ritual circles, which immediately started to undulate. The group looked on in trepidation, anticipation, disbelief mixed with hope, fear and confusion.

Over the course of around a minute, the three dark shapes took on the forms of Asya, Greg and Kaito, but dark and semi-translucent, like ghosts. At first, they were unmoving, their expressions blank like dummies. Then they suddenly animated, roused from torpor.

"For the next nine hours," Jason said, "they will be here for you to say the things you need to say. This will never happen again, so don't leave anything unsaid."

At first, nothing happened. The three souls projecting into Shade's bodies as vessels were disoriented by the process and their loved ones were all in shock. Then Greg waved.

"G'day, Mum."

Like a dam had broken, Jason felt a maelstrom of emotion bombard the room as the group swarmed the three souls. Projecting through Shade, the ghost-like figures were oddly soft to the touch, as if they were made from the same cloud-stuff as the palace.

Dawn could have arranged a more realistic depiction but felt being too lifelike could be dangerous. Jason wholeheartedly agreed, wanting to avoid the desperate hope of resurrection.

Dawn was the leader of the Cult of the World-Phoenix, albeit on a working sabbatical. Before creating her current avatar and returning to earth, she had contacted her counterpart in the Cult of the Reaper, convincing him to allow Shade, a shadow of the Reaper, to act as a vessel to project the souls of Jason's fallen companions.

It was not a new or unique event, with contacting the dead having a long history. There were very strict rules, however, the most important being no discussion could be made on the nature of the afterlife. Other rules included the fact that each soul could only be contacted one time.

Jason watched as the group converged on their dead loved ones, wandering over to stand next to Dawn.

"I don't think I can express the graciousness of what you've done here," he told her. "All I can do is thank you."

"When I came to you to save the world, you didn't negotiate or ask for payment. You didn't try and pass it off. You got to work. Call this my appreciation for that."

## Chapter 396

### Brooding Loner

Vampires were neither strictly living nor strictly dead. Most of the undead were quite explicitly deceased, rendered animate by one force or another. In the case of vampires, however, that force was life energy, rendering them, to almost any test, alive. Some even considered themselves more alive than ordinary humans and treated their induction into the ranks of undead being as born again, much like an Evangelical Christian.

Many such vampires counted their age from the moment they were turned, although Franklin was not one of them. He was not dismissive of the life he had lived and did not disdain his long-dead family. His last relative had been a vampire, like him; a nephew turned by Franklin himself to save the young man from an illness long-since cured by humanity.

In more than a century of life, Franklin had learned that regrets were inevitable. He regretted not turning more of his family and he regretted that the one he did turn was such a disappointment. It was Franklin himself who had turned his nephew over to the Network to keep the peace after the latest in a long line of mistakes was too grave for the Cabal to ignore.

That had been before the world changed and the Cabal grew ambitious. Magic was not just exposed to the world but growing in strength. A land of stone and fire had arisen right in the city, Bankstown turning into a place of pooling lava and dark stone. The people caught up in the change transformed into a species with dark skin and eyes of fire.

Different forces, magical and otherwise took different attitudes to the transformed zones once any fighting over the reality core each held was settled. Most governments declared them disaster sites, off-limits to civilians, then worked with the Network to recover the transformed people and salvage whatever magical materials were found within. The EOA was generally the weakest competitor in the fight for reality cores and left once it was decided.

The Cabal would usually wait until the fighting was settled and then start occupying the zones. For reasons unknown to them, the transformed zones made members of the Cabal grow stronger. Many of the Cabal's members had hit a ceiling in terms of power growth, as if the world were not magical enough for them to get stronger. In the transformation zones, this was no longer the case as stagnant power once more flowed through the Cabal's members. As more and more transformed zones appeared, the Cabal

started moving towards overall parity with the Network that had been dominating for the last century.

Within the cabal, the boost in power meant the least to the vampires, who suffered from a different kind of ceiling. Although their powers never stopped growing, once they crossed a certain threshold, the world's magic was no longer enough to sustain them. As their might reached the invisible barriers imposed by reality that stopped the growth of others, they instead fell into torpor. This had placed the vampires in an awkward position within the Cabal, as the most powerful leaders of their faction inevitably surrendered their position to enter hibernation, lest they wither and die.

The vampires were in a rush to awaken their ancient ones, as they feared that the growth of the other factions would eventually lead to all the cabal having greater power. If the vampires were going to dominate, they needed to awaken the old ones as quickly as they could. Other members of the Cabal reluctantly went along due to the need to compete with the Network.

In the case of Sydney, the Bankstown transformation zone was not ideal for vampires. They were highly resistant to most forms of damage, but fire was one of those that had a greater effect. This meant that while the flowing lava streams weren't a wildly dangerous hazard, they made for an unnerving environment.

This did not bother Franklin, especially. He was a peaceful man who did not share the ambitions of many others in the Cabal and had never been dissatisfied with the way things were. He only spent as much time in the transformation zone as was necessary for his role in the Cabal, which is why he was unhappy to have been made manservant to the arisen ancient one.

Franklin had become sedentary over the decades, which had been costing him more and more in recent years. First, there was his nephew. As much as Franklin had despised the boy, Clinton had been the last family Franklin had. The end of his bloodline. Many vampires considered the other vampires they turned their children and Franklin had long considered this path, but again, his sedentary nature had left him not getting around to it. Another regret.

When Craig Vermillion had come to him, Franklin belatedly realised that he should have gone with him. Afraid of change, Franklin had declined, not realising that there was no staying the way things were. Change was coming and it was a matter of choosing which change to involve himself with. He quickly came to realise that he had chosen poorly.

Like many vampires, Franklin had considered himself a living witness of history. He discovered how naïve he had been when confronted with a member of the British Empire born in the early years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Every moment was now filled with regret that he had not disappeared with Craig and the other cabal members with the foresight to see what was coming.

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The transformation events had changed the buildings of Bankstown into stone, usually very different from the ones that went before. The cabal had taken over the largest and most refined of them, a large stone manor, largely free of lava streams, with a luxuriously-appointed interior. It was the single aspect of the new world of which the ancient vampire, Lord Willoughby, unreservedly approved. There was no longer any utility infrastructure but that hardly concerned a man who had been hibernating in a sarcophagus since 1794.

One of the things he most disapproved of was modern clothing. For this reason, a small army of Cabal members had been dispatched to find something acceptable. As Willoughby lounged in a sitting room, in what no one dared tell him was women's underwear, a parade of clothing was presented. Each person presenting hoped that they wouldn't be the next one thrown into a hard stone wall when the lord's patience wore thin.

"My Lord," Franklin said. "I humbly recommend a more considered approach. The world has undergone many changes during your slumber. The essence magicians have grown powerful in your absence and—"

"Considered?" Lord Willoughby roared. "I have already considered the state of this miserable world and found it wanting! Jumped-up colonials thinking they can throw off the yoke of the Empire? Upstart sorcerers who would challenge the supremacy of the world's hidden rulers? The clothes alone are a travesty."

Franklin didn't voice his doubts on the degree to which the Cabal were ever hidden rulers directing human society from the shadows.

"My Lord, even the mortals have developed in ways that may come as a surprise. The capabilities of modern technology—"

"Are worthless in the face of overwhelming magical power," Willoughby cut him off.

"My Lord, I am merely making the humble suggestion that rushing to act before taking the time to learn may have unintended consequences."

"Do you think me a fool, Franklin? An ignorant buffoon, lost in time? Even in my day, we knew that if a servant kept insisting he was humble he was anything but."

"I apologise, my Lord."

“Of course you do, you gormless peasant. Have the glory devices been prepared?”

“We’ve prepared the cameras, my Lord.”

“Good. The Cabal of these modern times is a fallen beast. If magic is no longer hidden, then there is no excuse for the world not being under our heel. We shall begin with essence magicians and then the colonial government. The world shall see the glory of the new empire.”

Willoughby’s eyes lit up as someone brought in what looked like actual colonial-era garb.

“Excellent, finally.”

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“Costume shop?” Franklin asked.

Having escaped the mad British Lord, Franklin was in a car with Nathaniel, the man who had brought in the approved outfit. Nathaniel was an ogre, when not in human form, and a long-time friend of Franklin and Craig Vermillion.

“Theatre costume department,” Nathaniel said.

“Smart,” Franklin said. “Unlike me. I should have taken the advice of our mutual friend.”

“He betrayed the Cabal.”

“Did he? Or is he trying to save it?”

“Be careful who hears your words, Frank.”

“Oh, I am, Nathan. I don’t have a way to contact Craig, which I arranged in order to protect him. It means that I am unable to express the degree to which I regret my choice. It also means that I can’t tell him that I could potentially arrange access to the reality core storage, should anyone be looking to get in there while a certain vampire lord was indulging himself in raiding the Network headquarters.”

“You’re taking a risk telling me this, Frank.”

“I’ve lost too much by leaving everything around me to stagnate. It’s time I started taking some risks. Is that something you can help me with?”

“I would never betray the Cabal,” Nathaniel said. “Of course, if I just happen to run into my friend Craig, who knows what might come up in conversation.”

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Inside Jason’s cloud palace, floating on the ocean, the friends and family of Kaito, Greg and Asya were taking the chance to say goodbye. They had nine final hours, which proved a boon as it took some more time to accept what was happening than others.

Jason had created a large hall within the palace and once the ritual to call up the spirits of the dead was complete, he started modifying the cloud-stuff in the hall to fill the empty space with furniture. It was only moderately amazing to the group, most of which were getting their first exposure to the power of cloud constructs. After the ghostly souls of their loved ones returning, even the room transforming around them was only a mild wonder.

The event was essentially a wake, with two exceptions: the deceased were both present and cognisant and there wasn't any food. Although the food shortages of the monster wave months were slowly be remedied, the chaos following the transformation events was interfering with food distribution.

In that environment, Jason was not going to store a supply of food for entertainment purposes when almost everyone in his company was an essence user. Emi alone needed to eat, and only while she was outside of Jason's spirit vault. His soul realm turned out to suspend normal biological necessities, which left Jason both curious and glad. Curious, because he wondered what impact it had on the ageing process. Glad, because no one was going to the toilet in his soul.

Jason himself stayed quietly out of the way of the reunions, to the point of using subtle aura manipulation to push himself out of everyone's attention. A lot of the people present blamed Jason for the three deaths. He didn't want them wasting the last time they had with their loved ones on recrimination for him. That could wait until after.

As he watched everyone say their mournful goodbyes, he reflected on the people he had killed. From the beginning, he had worried about it becoming too easy and that had come to pass. Jason couldn't muster up any remorse for the people he massacred in Venezuela; only grim satisfaction that no more of his friends and family had been lost.

Jason waited as everyone else took their turn, sitting in a chair at the edge of the room until Farrah approached him.

"You're not being considerate," she told him as she sat on nothing, trusting him to create the cloud chair that rose up underneath her.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You're telling yourself that you're being considerate and letting everyone else spend the time with them. The truth is that you're scared. Scared to face them; scared that they'll blame you. Scared that they won't,"

Jason looked at her and then gave a slight nod.

"I suppose I am," he acknowledged.

“Don’t waste the time you have,” she told him. “Who gets this kind of chance? Don’t waste it.”

“You’re right.”

“Then why are you still sitting here with me?” she scolded.

Jason nodded, his cloud chair sinking into the floor as he stood up and made his way over to where people were surrounding the three dead guests of honour. Things grew quiet as Jason arrived near Kaito, whose soul was using Shade as a vessel. His body was dark and semi-transparent, looking every inch the ghost that he was.

“That’s some pretty rough sad face you’ve got their little brother,” Kaito said. “Who died?”

Jason was taken aback by the flippancy of his dead brother, unable to find words to respond.

“This is what’s great about being dead,” Kaito said cheerfully. “No one will tell you how bad your jokes are.”

“Your jokes suck donkey balls,” Jason said and Kaito burst out laughing.

“There he is. Excuse me, everyone; I need to have a private chat with my adorable little brother.”

“Adorable?” Jason asked as they headed away from the others.

“I’m dead, so I can call you what I like.”

“And here was me thinking that being dead might turn you into less of a tool bag,” Jason said. “I guess the afterlife isn’t turning into some enlightened being.”

Kaito’s image glitched like a television with a briefly-interrupted signal.

“Probably best to steer away from that particular topic,” Kaito said, looking queasy.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “Good thing Aunt Marjory isn’t here.”

Kaito laughed again.

“Did you know that she thought you were an angel?” he asked Jason.

“So I heard,” Jason said. “I wish I’d been there when she found out it was me.”

The brothers sat down, facing one another.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you,” Jason said.

“That was never your job,” Kaito said firmly. “Your job is saving the world, so don’t bugger it up. My wife and kids are on it.”

“I’ll do my best to see them safe,” Jason said.

“Just make sure you and my wife don’t comfort each other, reconnect and get married,” Kaito said.

“Oh, fuck you.”



Kaito's laughter erupted through the hall, drawing all eyes.

"And here I thought that avoiding bad language was the one thing you did learn from Mum," Kaito said.

"You're an arsehole."

"You can't call me an arsehole. I'm dead."

"I should take out a sandwich and eat it in front of you."

"Why would eating a sandwich annoy me?"

"Because you're dead and you'll never get to eat a sandwich again."

"Oh, you're right. That would be a dick move."

"You seem pretty happy for a dead guy but I won't ask how that works."

"I appreciate it," Kaito said. "You seem pretty cut up over me. It's nice to know you cared."

"No, I'm cut up over the other two. I'm faking it with you so Eri doesn't yell at me."

Kaito laughed before taking on a more sober expression.

"She's worried about you, Jason."

"I know."

"You killed a bunch of people on TV?"

"They were coming for all of us, Kai. As a publicity stunt. I had to drop them fast before they loaded themselves up with magic PCP. I didn't know it would kill them but I'm glad it did. I won't let what happened to you happen again."

"Did you tell her any of that or did you just go all emo and broody on her?"

Jason bowed his head, not meeting his brother's eyes.

"That's what I thought," Kaito said. "Jason, you've always done whatever you set out to do. You have a way of looking at where you are, looking at where you want to be and finding the path between. A lot of people can do that but not everyone is willing to pay the price. Hell, you got together with Amy and she's been in love with me since she was twelve. It wrecked you, yeah, but you got it done. It's pretty bloody intimidating, little brother."

"It's not always me who pays the price," Jason said, his voice breaking as he looked at his dead brother.

"I know. You need to watch out for that, but don't let it stop you. It's what makes you special. It's why I'm sure that you are going to save the world. If I'm being honest, I think it's why I think I did what I did to you. With Amy. You always had this determination, like nothing scared you and nothing was impossible. I never had that kind of courage. I think...

I think I wanted to prove that I could overcome that. That I was better than you. Amy, I think was trying to escape it.”

“Escape me.”

“Yeah. They were crappy reasons for the crappy thing we did. I’m sorry little brother.”

“Well, I did get you killed by an exploding wizard,” Jason said with a smiling mouth and sad eyes. “Your thing is still worse, but since this is the end, I guess I can forgive you.”

“Thank you, little brother. That means a lot.”

“Just to be clear,” Jason said, “forgiveness is about me being the better man, not you actually deserving it.”

“Oh, you asshole,” Kaito laughed, then once more he turned serious.

“Jason, I have something to ask you. Call it a belated dying wish.”

“If it’s a sandwich, I really can’t do anything about that.”

“It’s about the guy who’s going to save the world.”

“Well, that’s me. Unless you know something I don’t.”

“I know it’s you. I just want it to be the right you.”

“What are you talking about? Do I have an evil twin Mum never mentioned?”

Jason scowled.

“I bet she likes him more,” he muttered.

Kaito grinned.

“This is exactly what I want,” he said.

“Your dying wish is me ragging on Mum? Done.”

“Not that, you unfilial prick. I want the Jason who saves the world to be the one inexplicably obsessed with terrible TV shows that are older than he is, not the guy with the dead eyes who kills without remorse. I know you’ve seen a lot of terrible things. I know you’ve had to do some of them yourself. I need you to rise above that stuff instead of letting it drag you down. We kind of all need that because we’re relying on you, little brother.”

“It’s not so easy, Kai.”

“I know. But set out to do it and you’ll do it. That’s what you do. Are you going to refuse the last wish of your brother’s ghost?”

“I don’t even know where to start. The things I’ve done; the things I have left to do. It feels like I’m being dragged into a swamp. I’m not sure how to pull myself out.”

“By letting people help you, idiot. Being a brooding loner never works out. Even TV vampires figure that out by the end of the first season.”

“As if you’d know.”

"I watched vampire TV shows," Kaito said defensively.

"What vampire show did you watch?"

"You haven't heard of it."

"Look at who you're talking to. You didn't watch any vampire shows. If you say frigging Highlander..."

"I thought that was a movie about wizards or something."

"You think Highlander was about wizards?"

"I didn't like wizards. I watched a vampire show."

"What vampire show?"

"Forever Knight."

"Forever Knight?"

"See, I told you hadn't heard of it."

"All these years and only after you die do you reveal you did watch old TV shows after all? I can see why, given your choice. Forever Knight? A TV show based on a TV movie starring Rick Springfield - who they couldn't even get back for the show! The guy who sang Jesse's Girl was too busy for your terrible TV show."

"You realise that if you knew as much about magic as you did about American television from the eighties and nineties, you'd probably have saved the world already."

"Forever Knight was Canadian!"

On the other side of the hall, Erika had a tear in her eye and a smile on her lips as she watched her brothers loudly argue.

## Chapter 397

### High Maintenance

In the meeting hall of his cloud palace, Jason sat across from the spectre of his friend, Greg.

“I have no idea what to say,” Jason said.

“Wow,” Greg said. “I had to die to see it happen, but at least now I know what it takes.”

“I was going to get you a greeting card but I couldn’t find one for getting you killed by a wizard with bomb fists.”

“And there he is.”

“I looked into some print shops for a custom card but with everything going on, the wait times are egregious. As for online, you can just forget about it. Shipping delays are crazy.”

Jason’s smile was a pained rictus; a poor disguise for his obvious guilt and grief.

“I don’t want you mourning for me,” Greg said.

“You’re dead,” Jason said. “You don’t get a say.”

“At least put aside the guilt. I chose this.”

“I gave you the choice.”

“And the alternative is what?” Greg asked. “Do you even remember how miserable I was when you came back? I was never much more than an adequate lawyer and I’d been all but pushed out of my father’s law practice. I was staring down the barrel of a long, mediocre life. I lived more in the last six months than in the six years before it. Running around, fighting monsters with my magic powers. I got laid so much.”

“Mate...”

“I know, but I totally did. I met beautiful women from other dimensions and played board games with a vampire. I had magic powers. Steampunk magic powers. I got killed by a supervillain. I died fighting to save the world. Jason, if you told me everything that was going to happen – every single thing, including how I died – I’d have made the exact same choice. I’d have jumped at it.”

“Greg...”

“Don’t you dare pity me. You made my life a triumph. My death, too, for that matter. Don’t you ever try and take that from me by feeling like you somehow hurt me or made my choices for me. I died a hero, Jason, not a victim. You don’t get to turn me into one inside your head.”

"You seem pretty determined to not let me get a word in edgeways."

"That's because you'll just talk some crap. Look, we've been putting up with edgelord Jason for a while now but it's time to knock off the melodrama. You're not Darkwing Duck, so stop swanning about pretending you're the terror that flaps in the night. You're a god damn chuuni. You were a chuuni in school, you were a chuuni when you got back from magic land and you're such a giant bloody chuuni by now that you don't even realise you're more chuuni than you've ever been in your life."

"Please stop being saying chuuni."

"Jason you need the chuuni power."

"Chuuni power?"

"The Cabal is digging up an army of ancient vampires. You think popping out of the shadows doing a Batman voice is going to help against that lot? They've been pulling that trick since Constantinople; they're going to be better at it than you. If you want to beat them then you need to run your game, not theirs. Play to your own strengths."

"Which are?"

"A vampire is basically an ancient super chuuni. And in the land of the chuuni, the genre-savvy man is king."

"So, you're pretty much talking out your arse," Jason said.

"Yep," Greg said with a grin. "Sounded good, though, didn't it?"

"Not even a little. You just said chuuni about thirty times. You were babbling nonsense."

"Well, you gave babbling nonsense up to go all edgelord drama queen. Someone had to step up."

Jason ran a hand over his face.

"Is this what it's like talking to me?"

"It used to be," Greg said softly. "Back when you were actually fun. Yeah, things have gotten bad. You've lost people. But if you lose yourself, then everyone on Earth is completely buggered, so it's time to stop moping and put on your big boy pants. The floral print ones."

Jason and Greg looked at each other and both started laughing.

"You are really bad at the final guidance from a friend thing," Jason said.

"It wasn't that bad."

"It was pretty much you just saying chuuni and edgelord over and over."

"Take a look in the mirror, guy. You've been acting like a chuuni edgelord over and over."

“Harsh. You’re way better at making me feel bad than your Dad, although he’s giving it a good go.”

“Don’t worry about him. He’s blustering because he’s worried people will realise he’s just happy that I was the one who died and not my brother.”

Jason turned to glance at his mother across the room, in a group speaking with Kaito’s spectre.

“Yeah, I know that story,” he said, then turned back to Greg.

“I’m going to miss you, brother,” Jason said. “I’ll think of you every time I play a new board game you’ll never get a chance to try.”

“Oh, you prick.”

“You shouldn’t have called me a chuuni so many times.”

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The streets of Sydney were much less congested than normal, in the wake of the transformation events. Government restrictions and business closures led to little enough traffic that the fleet of vehicles, mostly vans and SUVs, were able to sweep rapidly to the Sydney Network branch’s building.

Cabal members poured out of the vehicles, human forms transforming into a menagerie of bizarre creatures and mythological beings. At the head was the vampire lord, Willoughby. Oddly, there were what at least looked like ordinary humans operating camera equipment.

The Network branch's lower levels were largely filled with ordinary humans, many of whom had only learned the true nature of their organisation when magic went public. These were the administration offices for the businesses that had been both the source of funding and operational cover for the Network over the last half-century.

The lower floors became a bloodbath as the Cabal stormed the building. They had clashed with the network numerous times over reality cores but this was something different. The Cabal had invaded the Network’s home, intent on pulling them out root and stem. This was not a fight for riches or power but for survival. The Network’s tactical squads swiftly descended from the upper floors to engage the invaders.

Willoughby was startled by the resistance the Network put up. He had been warned repeatedly but he was not a good listener. Surprised was not the same as being defeated, however, and the vampire's might was not to be overlooked. When a powerful conjured machine gun ripped holes in him, streams of blood flowed out of the wounds and through the air like ropes. They entangled the man with the huge gun and dragged him into

Willoughby's waiting embrace. Draining the silver-ranker's blood rapidly restored his health and he pushed deeper into the building.

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Shade was the vessel through which Kaito, Asya and Greg were projecting their souls and had control of how realistic those projections were. He was keeping them ghostly to prevent their loved ones from thinking the soul projections meant that resurrection was possible, although some still hoped in spite of assurances that it wasn't.

Shade's control meant that as Jason sat close to Asya, holding her hands in his, Shade could make them more solid, feeling like her actual hands instead of insubstantial ephemera.

"Greg and Kaito both told me I need to pull myself together," Jason said. "Is that what you're going to do as well?"

"Do I need to?" she asked. "Trust me to find such a high-maintenance boyfriend."

"High maintenance?"

"Oh, please, Asano. I love you but you are an absolute pain to deal with."

Jason's eyes went wide and she squeezed his hands.

"Yes, I said it," she told him. "It's not like I'll get another chance. I know you didn't get there yet, but you would have. I had no intentions of letting you go."

She tried to smile but didn't do a great job.

"I guess that's out of my hands, now."

"I'm sorry."

"For what? I hate to break it to you, Asano, but not everything is about you. You weren't a part of my life when I joined the Network. I made the choice to stand up and protect the world from whatever magic threw at it. I didn't want to die, but at least I died fighting for something worthwhile."

Jason nodded.

"I'm not going to tell you to pull yourself together," Asya said. "I'm going to tell you to stay focused. Keep your eye on what we died for, not the fact that we died."

"You don't want me going after the gold-ranker."

"You're right. All that gets you is revenge and that's not for us. That's for you, and you have more important things to be getting on with. Don't take stupid chances that cost you everything and get you nothing."

"He killed you."

"And killing him won't bring me back."

She poked him in the forehead.

“High maintenance. I’m dead and I still need to stop you from doing something stupid.”

“I wasn’t going to go after him,” Jason insisted.

“No?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

She gave him a flat look.

“I mean, if he came looking for me…” Jason admitted.

“Then you run. Run and hide like a scared little boy.”

“What if I can lure him into—”

“No. Promise me, Jason.”

“Fine,” he grumpily acquiesced. “I won’t fight the gold-ranker. It’s not like I was going to anyway.”

“Oh, please.”

Jason bowed his head.

“I don’t know if I can do it, Asya,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. “Everyone on Earth is relying on me, whether they know it or not, and I’m just making it up as I go.”

Asya’s ghostly form grew more substantial and she lifted his face with her hands, resting her forehead against his.

“You always have been, for as long as I’ve known you. How many times did I yell at you for insufficient debate prep? But it’s gotten you this far.”

“I’ve died,” he said. “Kind of a lot, and the world is coming apart at the seams.”

“And you’re going to save it. Then you’re going to be obnoxiously smug about it, but try and tone it down. You’re going to have trouble finding another girl willing to love all this.”

She leaned back and gestured at him with a sweeping hand and he grinned at her.

“Is that so?” he asked.

“You should listen to Greg and your brother,” she said. “Be the crazy weirdo I fell for.”

“I really want to kiss you,” he said, “but I would actually be kissing Shade. I’m pretty sure making out with your own familiar is crossing some kind of line.”

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The deadline for Greg, Kaito and Asya's visitation drew close. Jason, Dawn and Farrah were meeting with them for the last time before handing them off to their families for their final goodbyes.



“You need to keep this guy in line,” Asya told Farrah. “He’s not as strong as you; he’s just good at faking it.”

“I know,” Farrah said.

“Hey...”

They made their last goodbyes and then the three ghosts went off to their loved ones, Jason heading toward Erika and the rest of the Asano family with Kaito.

“I love you, brother,” Kaito said as they walked.

“I’m going to bang your wife and raise your kids,” Jason whispered. “I’m going to make all three call me Daddy.”

“Oh my god, you’re an arse.”

\*\*\*

As they waited out the clock for the three ghostly figures to reach the end of their time back on Earth, Shade quietly spoke to Jason.

“Mr Asano, there is a situation.”

Jason wandered free of his family to speak with Shade in private.

“Something at the village?” he asked. He had left one of Shade’s bodies at the village in case something happened while his family were all in the cloud palace.

“Not the village. The Cabal has initiated a full assault on the Network headquarters in Sydney. They are live streaming it and the news stations have picked up the feed. The military has been called out but this is far beyond them. The Cabal has one of the ancient vampires.”

Jason looked over at Kaito, Greg and Asya, talking with their families. Asya was keeping an eye on him and wandered over when she saw his expression. Kaito, Greg, Dawn and Farrah spotted her and followed.

“You have to go?” Asya asked.

“Yeah,” he said.

“What is it?” Farrah asked.

“The Cabal and their old vampire are live-streaming an all-out attack on the Network headquarters in Sydney.”

No one suggested not going. For all that they had fallen out with the Network, they all knew people there.

“Alright,” Asya said. “Go save the day.”

“Kick some arse, little brother.”

“Just remember to play the hero, not the villain,” Greg said.

Jason looked at them all for the last time.

“Whatever it is waiting for you on the other side,” he told them, “I hope it’s amazing.”

He opened a portal and stepped through. His portal ability was just strong enough to send three silver-rankers, allowing Farrah and Dawn to follow before the portal closed.

Kaito, Greg and Asya turned back to the group, all of which were looking at them.

“He’s coming back,” Greg assured them. “He’s almost definitely not going to leave you out here in the middle of the ocean.”

## Chapter 398

### Treachery or Cowardice

Nigel and his nine-person tactical section were retreating down a hallway on the fourth floor of the Network building. They had rushed downstairs in response to the Cabal's attack, only to encounter the people of the lower floors coming up, transformed into ravening ghouls. Undead monstrosities with a frenzied hunger for living flesh, they poured up the corridor like a wave, ignoring the gunfire slamming into them.

Becoming the undead had turned normal people into silver-rank creatures; far less powerful than even a weak silver-rank monster but still resistant to the attacks of bronze-rankers. The vampire lord knew this, so was surprised that the outnumbered tactical teams weren't immediately overrun.

Nigel's tactical team retreated in good order, despite only two members being silver-rank. Nigel had been the tactical instructor for the Sydney branch prior to Farrah's arrival and had worked with her to develop a retraining program for existing tactical teams while Farrah focused on new recruits. Nigel's own team used a mixture of traditional Network methodology and Farrah's more ability-centric approach to good effect. They had come a long way since they escorted Jason into his first proto-space.

Their discipline leveraged their capabilities effectively, with Jonno and Nigel himself laying down fire from conjured assault rifles as they fell back. Thorny had grown an extra pair of arms and was firing four conjured pistols while Digit was sending arrows downrange that exploded in blasts of fire and electricity.

Even with the gunfire laying waste to them, the ghouls kept coming. They wore the business attire of lower floor admin staff, with police and military uniforms mixed amongst them. The vampire lord had performed mass transformations on the dead killed by the Cabal, which was not limited to the Network staff. The police and military had been sent in as a response to the Cabal's brazen attack in the heart of Sydney, only to pay a deadly price at the hands of the vampire lord.

Nigel knew at least one of the teams that rushed down from the upper floors had been overrun. As his team had been pulling back in the face of a ghoulish wave, he had glimpsed the ancient vampire biting into the neck of another team's section leader and none of the team were responsive to radio checks. As far as Nigel knew, essence users couldn't be turned into ghouls but he was worried they could be turned into something worse.

The ghouls broke past the gunfire, rushing Nigel's team. The team stopped firing and Cobbo dashed forward from the backline to meet them. He wasn't running but hurtling through the air, his spear set like a jousting lance. It plunged into a ghoul and Cobbo's magically enhanced momentum stopped dead. The momentum all transferred into the ghoul, who was sent tumbling back into the others before exploding, ripping apart the closest ghouls and scattering the rest. It gave Nigel's team a reprieve as Cobbo fell back and the shooters resumed fire at the ghouls.

They continued withdrawing to the stairwell, the elevators having been shut off to prevent the Cabal using them. The next time the ghouls drew close, Jonno dropped his conjured rifle and called up a comically large rotary cannon that mowed down the ghouls, ripped apart the wall behind them and shattered the glass on the exterior wall beyond. More of the seemingly endless ghouls came streaming into the hall, unintimidated by Jonno's absurd display of power.

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"I'm glad to see you changed your mind, Frank," Vermillion said, shaking Franklin's hand. They were standing under a bridge, away from prying eyes.

"It was changed for me," Franklin said. "I should have listened to you, Craig."

"It may be for the best you didn't," Vermillion said. "Now we know your idiot ancient one pulled everyone off the storage facility to go attack the Network."

"Not everyone," Franklin said. "We're going to have to fight our way in and out. It's our own people, Craig."

"I know. But it's the only time security will be light enough for that to even be possible," Vermillion said.

"Yeah," Franklin said, resignation in his voice. "We need to go now. Our window is small."

"Alright," Vermillion said. "Let's go."

\*\*\*

Due to the propensity of proto-spaces and transformation events, five full tactical teams had been on standby in the building's upper floors and had moved down to confront the Cabal attack. Without the magical interference of a dimensional space or transformation zone, comms were working perfectly and the teams were able to coordinate.

Unfortunately, they arrived downstairs into the midst of chaos. The vampire lord had transformed an alarming number of the dead into ghouls and the cabal was using them as

cannon fodder. They refrained from engaging the Network teams, who they let exhaust themselves against the ghouls.

The Network's Director of Tactical Operations, who the tactical teams called the Ditto, was Koen Waters. He had ordered the teams to make a slow withdrawal back upstairs, giving the people on the floors above time to reach the magical defences of the Building's uppermost floors.

One of the five network teams was hit by the vampire himself and wiped out, while another lost cohesion and were broken up by the encroaching ghoulish horde. The silver-rank section leader fell back with a couple of team members as the others were cut off, either caught by the Cabal or the ghouls or managing to escape. Some shot holes in the exterior windows, the bronze-rankers willing to risk a four-storey drop over facing the wave of undead.

The remaining three teams, including Nigel's, successfully reached different stairwells around the building. They were all on the fourth floor and worked to secure the stairwell entrances before moving up. In the case of Nigel's team, this meant Darce hurriedly summoning her steam golem to serve as a bulwark for the door. As she did that, Orange crouched down and put his hands on the top stair leading down, using his ability to weaken materials on the stairs below.

When Orange was done, he stood up and Nigel gave him an inquisitive look.

"What?" Orange asked in his abrasive bogan drawl.

"Why didn't the stairs collapse?" Nigel asked.

"The stairs will seem fine until a few of them get on there," Orange said. "Then they'll collapse and drop those undead buggers like sacks of sh—"

"We get the idea," Nigel said. "Good job."

Leaving behind the trapped stairs and the large summoned entity made of what looked like brass, they made their way up as Nigel reported in over the radio.

"Ditto, we've secured the East stairwell as best we can at level four and are moving up."

"Evac of floors five through eight is proceeding smoothly," Koen responded.

"Converge on the ninth floor armoury; that will be our first fixed defence point."

The ninth floor was where the Network's emplaced magic defences began and their magical resources were stored. It was the place where the Network could best leverage their advantages to repel attackers. The only reason the tactical teams had descended from there was to protect as many people from the lower floors as they could.

The team continued moving up. The stairwell was located on the building exterior and had glass on one side, allowing the team to look out at what was happening on the ground as they ascended. After the Cabal's open assault on a building in the Sydney CBD, authorities had intervened, cordoning off a large area around the building. The team saw where the cordon had been pulled back and expanded after an unsuccessful clash with Cabal forces.

"Since when do you have the level of fine control with your abilities to trap the stairs, Orange?" Digit asked as they double-timed up the stairs.

"I'm gettin' good at me powers," Orange said. "I've been practising like Instructor Hot Stuff taught us."

"You're a pig, Orange," Darce said.

"I only call her that because of her volcano powers," Orange said. "Do I also want to bang her like a drum? Yes, I do, but I'm a gentleman."

"So that's the secret to having you put in the effort," Digit said. "Have a beautiful woman to tell you to."

"Mate, that's no bloody secret," Orange said. "Send a pretty girl my way and you can get me to do whatever you... oh, bloody hell."

Each member of Nigel's section was keeping their head on a swivel and spotted the danger together. People with grotesquely elongated limbs were climbing up the exterior of building, their bare hands and feet adhering to the glass.

"The outside of the building is pretty reflective, right?" Darce asked. "Do they even know we're in here?"

Nigel raised his rifle and aimed at the window.

"They're about to."

\*\*\*

"My ghouls should have overrun this place by now," Willoughby complained. "What is taking so long?"

"Again, Lord Willoughby, it's the essence magicians. They're far more powerful than they were in your time."

"This is my time, now. Who even are you? Where's my manservant?"

"I'm Richard, my lord. No one has been able to find Franklin since we arrived."

"Treachery or cowardice," Willoughby spat. "Either way, drag him in front of me the moment he's found."

\*\*\*

Jason, Farrah and Dawn emerged on top of a tall building in the Sydney CBD, close to the Network building. Jason had first visited that rooftop to observe the building while still feeling out the Network, during his first days back on Earth. After getting their attention with his hospital faith healer stunt he had Shade follow the people who had arrived to investigate. That had led him to this rooftop.

They were surprised to find they were not alone on the rooftop, finding an army sniper team. Jason was worried about what their reaction would be until he felt a flood of relief from the soldiers.

"You're Jason Asano," one of them said.

"I'm wearing his underwear, so I hope so," Jason said.

"Thank god you're here."

"Aren't you meant to try and take me into custody or something?"

"Bugger that," the soldier said. "There's something down there. Something bad. It's killing people and turning them into some kind of fast zombie."

"Ghouls," Dawn said. "That will be people without magic that he's transformed. They're already dead and we can't do anything for them now but give them peace. It's the essence users we need to concern ourselves with. If he takes them alive, he can turn them."

"I fought a monster called a blood weaver," Jason said. "It vamped people up but they could be cleansed if you got to them quickly enough."

"Lesser vampires," Dawn said. "You will be able to do the same here. The curse can warp the body and mind but not the soul, unless the soul surrenders to it. If you can get to them before the curse fully claims the body, they can be saved. Once their bodies have gone from living to undead, we can only put them down with the ghouls."

"How long do we have?" Jason asked.

"Hours," Dawn said. "If we act now, we should comfortably be in time. You just have to avoid getting killed while you work, but at least the curse will negate their essence abilities. You go through the building, finding and cleansing the lesser vampires. You will likely have to fight through ghouls and the Cabal to do it."

"We go after the head vampire," Farrah said.

"Yes," Dawn agreed. "I'm confident that I can outfight it but even with fire powers to impede its healing I can't deal enough damage to kill a gold-ranker. That will be your job, Farrah. I'll set up the strikes and you hit with maximum efficiency."

"Alright," Farrah said.

The trio moved to the edge of the roof and surveyed the area. The military and police cordon was keeping people away, while the street in front of the building was strewn with blood and destroyed cars. There were only a handful of bodies, the ones too damaged to be worth turning into ghouls. There were holes in the building's glass exterior. As for the inside of the building, both Dawn and Jason had aura senses powerful enough to examine the interior.

"Ghouls and the Cabal have the first three floors and most of the fourth," Jason said. "It looks like the Network is moving its people to the upper floors where they have magical defences in place."

"There's an armoury on level nine," Farrah said, knowing the building much better than Jason. "They'll set up their first proper defensive line there."

"Then that's where I'll go," Jason said. "I'll start at the bottom and make my way up. They're using the ghouls as meat shields so I can hopefully catch the vamp minions from behind."

"We'll go straight for the old vampire," Dawn said. "The Network will fare better if we can keep him out of the fight."

"The aura those ghouls are throwing off is very feral," Jason said. "The vampire has enough control to stop the ghouls going after the Cabal?"

"From how quickly he created them all," Dawn said, "he is likely from a bloodline that specialises in creating servitors. That is good for us because that kind of bloodline is weaker in direct confrontations."

"How would I do against one of these vampires?" Jason asked.

"Your blood abilities won't be as effective on a gold rank one as those of your rank and lower," Dawn said. "Your powers that impair resistances and ignore rank disparity means your blood magic will still be an advantage but don't underestimate the vampire. Their attributes are similar to an essence user of their rank and they all have different blood powers, based on their vampiric bloodlines."

"How would you rate my chances?" Jason asked.

"If you used a vampire's minions to grow stronger before confronting a solitary vampire, you would most likely win. Without enhancing yourself, or against numbers, I would be far less optimistic."

"So I need to pick my battles," Jason said. "That's nothing new."

Jason had several means of stealing the strength of his enemies. He was able to stack health through various drain powers and if he had enough dead enemies he could compensate for the most dangerous disparity with gold-rankers, which was speed.



---

Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Silver 2 (04%).
  
- Effect (iron): Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.
  
- Effect (bronze): Affects any number of bodies in a wide area.
  
- Effect (silver): Gain an instance of [Blood Frenzy] for each corpse drained, up to a threshold determined by current rank. After reaching the threshold, gain instances of [Blood of the Immortal] instead.
  
- [Blood Frenzy] (boon, unholy, stacking): Bonus to [Speed] and [Recovery]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.
  
- [Blood of the Immortal] (boon, healing, unholy, stacking): On suffering damage, an instance is consumed to grant a powerful but short-lived heal-over-time effect. Additional instances can be accumulated but do not have a cumulative effect.

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From the beginning, Blood Harvest had been Jason's strongest recovery power, used to replenish himself after defeating enemies. Now it had a new purpose as a trump card for facing higher-rank foes. If he had the chance to eliminate enough lower-rank enemies first, he could compensate for a gold-ranker's speed by enhancing his own. He still wouldn't be able to match a gold-ranker, at least until he was much further into silver rank himself, but it would be enough to keep him from being wildly outclassed.

Jason, Farrah and Dawn leapt off the edge of the building, each sprouting wings. Jason, in the middle, had wings of night formed from the cloak he conjured around himself. To each side of him were women with wings of fire, gliding in formation towards the Network building.

## Chapter 399

### Comely Wenches

Jason, Farrah and Dawn were gliding through the air towards the Network building. Twenty dark forms emerged from Jason, heading towards the bottom half of the Building. Shade couldn't easily penetrate the magically protected upper floors but his incorporeal form could easily scout out the rest. Once Shade had bodies all over the building, Jason could easily shadow jump to any of them.

The vampires had naturally good aura control, if somewhat limited in scope, with Jason himself having learned some tricks from Craig Vermillion. The ancient vampire was projecting his aura strongly, flooding the building with fear and dread. It made him easy to find but he also sensed the approach of Jason and the others as they fended off his aura. Farrah needed to expend more effort than Jason and Dawn but still managed to resist the oppressive effects of the vampire's aura.

Jason headed for the ground while Dawn and Farrah went for the third floor. As they split up, Farrah used one of her powers on Jason.

- 
- [Farrah Hurin] is attempting to use ability [Power Bond] on you.
  - [Power Bond] will enhance some of your abilities for the duration of the bond and give [Farrah Hurin] access to your knowledge. This is restricted to your knowledge of concepts external to yourself. This ability cannot read your thoughts or access your knowledge of yourself.
  - [Power Bond] can be rejected or ended at any time by you.
  - If you do not implicitly trust [Farrah Hurin], this ability will fail. Subconscious distrust will prevent this power from working.
- 

Jason accepted the power.

- 
- You have been affected by [Power Bond], connecting you to [Farrah Hurin]. You may end this connection at any time.
  - [Power Bond] has used a random essence from [Farrah Hurin] to enhance one of your abilities at random. Ability [Sanguine Horror] has been enhanced by [Fire Essence]. While [Power Bond] is in effect, familiar [Colin] will be immune to fire and heat effects and inflict [Burning] when making attacks.
- 

“Oh,” Jason said, his dark hood hiding the wide grin on his face. “Oh dear me.”

Jason didn't bother to hide as he alighted on the ground outside the building, a half-dozen more Shades emerging from his shadow. There was a small group of Cabal members standing outside the door, none of them hiding their true forms. One was a cyclops, twice the height of a man, while the others looked like stretched-out humans with long, narrow limbs. The cyclops was silver-rank, while the others were bronze.

When they noticed Jason's arrival, the Cabal members didn't move to attack. The long-limbed ones were fearful while the cyclops was angry, all of which Jason could read from their auras.

"Out and proud; I have to respect that," Jason said, looking up at the cyclops. "You're pretty awesome."

"Why are you here?" one of the Cabal members asked. "The Network betrayed you."

"That's why I put my trust in people and not institutions," Jason said. "I still have friends here and I'm not going to let your new boss eat them. Are you really okay with what's happening here?"

"Power always wins," the cyclops growls in a voice of rumbling thunder. "I want to test your power."

"I'm sure you do," Jason said, pushing the hood back off his head. "Once you have, though, you'll wish you hadn't. If the Cabal is willing to pack up and go home, I'm willing to let it."

The cyclops threw back its head to let out a booming laugh.

"You think you can kill us all?"

"Yes," Jason said.

"We never wanted to be part of this," one of the long-limbed Cabal members said. "You don't know how strong the vampire is. Can't you feel it?"

For all his aura's strength, Jason didn't have the power to suppress the vampire's gold-rank aura. His was too strong for the vampire to suppress in turn, even if it could. Only certain bloodlines possessed that aspect of aura control.

"I can feel it," Jason said.

He sent his own aura flooding over the building, overlaying it with that of the vampire. The domineering aspect of Jason's aura competed with the fear-drenched aura of the vampire. It wasn't exactly a positive sensation but Jason's aura did include protective aspects. The Network members in the building were given a sense of being shielded from a monster by a tyrant as Jason alleviated the vampire's oppressive force.

The long-limbed Cabal members were looking at Jason with even more fear than before. The vampire hadn't spared his own people from the effect of his aura, so now they

were suffering both his and Jason's simultaneously. The results were purely psychological but they were effective nonetheless.

"I have a thing about people turning victims into the undead and me having to put them all down," Jason said. "If anyone but the old vampire and his ghouls choose to run, I won't chase. Go inside and tell your people."

"Don't you dare," the cyclops warned, sensing the fear from his minions. He had willpower to spare, impressively unintimidated by either aura.

"I don't want to get caught up in the middle of this," the long-limbed man complained. "Are you seriously alright with killing all these people?"

A beam of light shot from the cyclops' eye like a laser and the long-limbed man screamed as his flesh burned.

"Yes," the cyclops growled as the man tried to run but the beam tracked him until he fell dead to the ground.

Jason tucked his hood back over his head and wrapped his cloak around himself as identical cloaks manifested on the half-dozen Shades standing with him. Moving fast, it would be hard to tell them apart from Jason, especially with Jason's aura washing over them all.

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Farrah's sword whip lashed out to shatter the glass, allowing her and Dawn to fly into the third floor unimpeded, where they sensed the source of the vampire's aura. Unlike Jason, the vampire lacked the control to hide his location in an area flooded by his aura, instead, standing out like a beacon.

Dawn and Farrah touched down in a wide hallway full of ghouls. Farrah stomped the floor and a wall of obsidian rose up to bisect the hallway lengthways, swiftly enough to crush several ghouls into the ceiling. The wall then exploded into shards, shredding the remaining ghouls into bloody chunks and the hallway fell silent.

The door at the far end of the hallway opened and a man entered, unfazed by the bloody horror Farrah had made of the hallway. Looking like he stepped out of a period drama rather than the next room, he gazed at the women with a self-satisfied sneer.

"Finally something in this wretched modern world I can wholeheartedly approve of," Willoughby said. "A pair of comely wenches delivering themselves unto me."

"I don't think you're going to like what we're here for," Farrah said.

"I think I might," Willoughby said. "Women are no fun unless they struggle."

"I'm going to enjoy killing you," Farrah said.

"I'm going to enjoy teaching you to use that sharp tongue for... better purposes."

Farrah conjured her obsidian armour around herself as Willoughby dashed forward with the lightning speed of a gold-ranker, practically teleporting down the hallway. Almost instantaneous was not actually instantaneous, however, and while Farrah and the vampire traded barbs, Dawn had been muttering a spell incantation.

Just before the vampire reached them, magic circles appeared on each wall of the corridor, shooting out a net of flaming threads that Willoughby crashed into like a fly into a spider's web. His momentum was arrested as he was tangled in the burning threads but he immediately started yanking himself free with his gold-rank strength. Farrah didn't waste the chance, though, and her whip-sword snaked out to wind itself around the vampire.

Farrah's sword, when unextended, was a jagged-edge greatsword made from obsidian. In its whip-sword state, the obsidian teeth separated and were strung along a flexible cord of red-hot lava, like shark teeth on a necklace. The lava joined the flaming threads of Dawn's trap spell in burning the vampire but the damage was superficial. Willoughby strained against the sword wrapped around him and Farrah didn't leave it in place, knowing he would quickly burst the conjured weapon. Its flexibility and power were incredible but its durability was its weak point.

When Farrah retracted her sword, the obsidian razors chewed up the vampire as if he was caught in an industrial accident. He rapidly healed, although the burnt portions of his flesh recovered more slowly. His regeneration was impeded as flames lit up from the corkscrew wounds left by Farrah's sword.

Dawn had been casting a second spell as Farrah clashed with the vampire and steel rings appeared around Willoughby as he recovered. They immediately warped as the vampire flexed but it bought time for the women to make more attacks. Farrah stomped the floor and an obsidian spike drove up through the floor, piercing through the vampire's crotch to impale him. Obsidian spikes then stabbed out of his body.

It was one of Farrah's most powerful attacks, while also being very efficient in terms of mana cost to damage. The problem was that it was an easy attack to read and avoid, so it saw little use. Only when the enemy was large and slow or caught up by another ability was it useful, which made Dawn a valuable partner for Farrah.

Despite the power of the attack, it barely impeded the vampire. There was a sharp crack of stone from inside the vampire's body as he once more moved to the attack and the impaling shaft was broken. Farrah stood strong against the gold ranker, fighting back as best she could. The speed difference was on full display as her sword hit nothing but air while his clawed nails tore strips off her obsidian armour.

Farrah was not Willoughby's primary objective, however, as he had identified Dawn's control effects as his primary impediment to killing them. The vampire kicked Farrah square in the chest, sending her flying back past Dawn and out through the hole through which she had entered the building, falling out of sight.

Dawn targeted Willoughby's brief moment of imbalance after the lunging kick, seizing the chance to step forward and place her hand against the vampire's chest. All the fire in the room, from the remnants of Dawn's flaming threads to the burning effects Farrah left behind on Willoughby's body vanished. Immediately after, an explosion under Dawn's hand sent the vampire hurtling back down the hallway. She followed up with a rapid series of rising hand gestures, each one causing a wall of flames to rise up one after another, blocking the path between themselves and Willoughby.

Farrah flew back into the building, moving faster for having dismissed her damaged armour. Her flaming wings vanished and she conjured up a fresh set of armour.

"It's going well," she said, eyeing the flaming barriers sealing the hallway.

"It's far from over," Dawn warned.

Dawn was a control specialist, able to do some damage but nowhere near enough to kill a gold-ranker. Unfortunately, her silver-rank control effects only lasted moments against gold-ranker and the most she could do was buy critical moments for Farrah to land her attacks. Even so, Dawn's precision and judgement had allowed her and Farrah to largely control the opening stages of the fight, although the vampire's gold-rank power meant that everything could change in a moment.

Rather than rush through the sequence of flame walls blocking the corridor, Willoughby leveraged the advantage of his gold-rank physicality to smash through the walls of the adjoining rooms, which Farrah and Dawn heard as a rapid series of crashes. The vampire smashed his way back into the hallway, grabbed Farrah and kept going, battering her right through the opposite wall. Lifting her into the air by the neck, he slammed her into the floor so hard that they crashed through it, dropping to the level below.

Kneeling on top of Farrah, Willoughby looked around at what should have been a small army of ghouls. Instead, the ghouls were once more unmoving corpses, withered and dry as if they'd been dead for months.

His attention was drawn back to Farrah as she punched him in the ear. He pinned her arms under his knees and grabbed the face of her helmet, the obsidian cracking as he broke the faceplate right off. He raised a clawed hand to bring it down on her face when a flaming rope from the hole above wrapped around it. More ropes snaked around his other

limbs and he was yanked through the hole and pulled up to the ceiling where the ropes were anchored. He was bound for only a brief moment before quickly breaking free.

In the moment he was tangled up, Farrah was still lying on the floor below but sent a stream of obsidian shards up to bury themselves in the vampire's body. They joined the broken shards still in his body from his earlier impalement, but like that attack, the obsidian did not noticeably impede him. He dashed at Dawn, who calmly evaded his attacks.

Unlike Farrah, who was at the beginning of silver rank, Dawn's avatar was closer to the peak. This meant that while her speed was no match for the gold-ranker, she was far better off than Farrah. The experience-born expertise of a diamond-rank essence user was enough to make up the difference with a vampire attacking like a feral beast, wildly swinging at her with clawed hands.

While he was unable to hit her, he was so fast and so ferocious that Dawn could do nothing but avoid attacks. Farrah leapt up from the floor below to attack the vampire from behind but was intercepted. As she arrived behind him, Willoughby snarled and blood spurted from his back, shredding his clothes. Rather than splatter over Farrah, it coalesced into a blood clone between her and the vampire. It looked identical to Willoughby except for its purple-red bruise colouration, reminiscent of Colin's silver-rank form mimicking Jason.

Both Dawn and Farrah sensed through the vampire's aura that creating the clone had cost him considerable power. As Dawn predicted, most of Willoughby's powers were related to creating minions, with little in the way of combat power. He had seen Farrah demonstrate that using ghouls was little use, while his freshly made lesser vampires had been blinked out of his senses steadily during the fight. It was a concerning development but one he could not turn his attention to as he fought the two women.

Willoughby needed to distract one of the women long enough to kill the other as their double-team tactics were proving too effective. The blood clone was Willoughby's last resort, the creation which consumed a huge portion of his accumulated life force. Once he defeated the women he would need to feed on them to completion instead of turning them into lesser vampires. Even then, he would need blood infused with reality core energy as soon as possible.

Unfortunately for Willoughby, a vampire's handful of powers paled compared to those available to an essence user. Farrah had a last resort of her own and, sensing Willoughby expend a huge portion of his power, slipped a gold spirit coin into her mouth. Her Limit Breaker power would greatly extend the time she could use the spirit coin boost to her attributes and the vampire swore as he sensed Farrah's aura grow sharply in strength.

When Farrah used her Limit Breaker ability to confront a gold-rank essence user, she had still been outmatched. This was not the case against a gold-rank vampire, let alone a blood clone that was an inferior duplicate. As she tore through it, Willoughby realised he was not going to win and tried to flee, dashing past Dawn and aiming for the hole in the exterior wall.

Free of the vampire's attacks, however, Dawn was once again free to use her powers and a web of steel-like thread filled the gap. The vampire crashed into them, trying to force his way through but they slowed him as Dawn cast a spell and more flaming ropes emerged from the floor, wrapped around the vampire and dragged him back inside.

After that, it was just a matter of time as Dawn continued to impede both the vampire and the clone as Farrah lay into them with power fuelled by the spirit coin she consumed. As a finisher, she transformed the many obsidian fragments she had left in his body into lava, burning him from the inside out. In the end, the vampire was left as a burned wreck, bound to the floor by conjured steel wires it no longer had the strength to break.

"Don't kill it," Dawn said. "Wait for Asano. There's something I want to test."



## Chapter 400

### A Lot Like a Guess

Jason stood in front of the Network building, the cyclops and other Cabal members still standing in front of him. The air stank of burned flesh from the one that had tried to flee and was slain by the cyclops for making the attempt, leaving a dozen more. Jason stood flanked by Shades as he squared-off with the people in front of him.

The cyclops fired its eyebeam at Jason and one of the orbs turned into a shield to intercept it. The powerful beam swiftly annihilated the barrier but the momentary delay was enough for Jason to step into one of the Shades and vanish.

The other Cabal members took the chance to scatter as the cyclops was focused on Jason, some dashing into the building while others ran into the streets or even started Spider-Manning their way up the side of the building. The cyclops panned its eye over the space in front of the building for Jason, blasting beams at the Shades and eliminating two of them before the rest vanished into shadows.

Jason rose up from the cyclops' own shadow, between it and the building and immediately made a series of sewing needle dagger strikes into the towering creature's thigh while swiftly chanting spells.

*"Bleed for me."*

*"Carry the mark of your transgressions."*

*"Your fate is to suffer."*

The cyclops didn't enjoy the balanced attributes of an essence user, with speed being the price for its size and strength. It was fast for its size but still a brute, all power and no finesse. This made it easy pickings for Jason as he locked in his full suite of afflictions.

At silver rank, Jason's affliction array was more terrible than ever. Not only was he able to bypass immunities that had previously stifled him, but he also had more damage effects than ever. His special attack, Punish, had been one of his bread and butter powers from the beginning and continued to be a core technique.

---

#### Ability: [Punish] (Sin)

- Special attack (melee, curse, holy).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Silver 2 (07%).
  
- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage and the [Sin] affliction.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Price of Absolution].
  - 
  - Effect (silver): If the target has any instances of [Sin] they suffer an instance of the [Wages of Sin] affliction. If the enemy struck has no instances of [Sin] but does have instances of [Penance], they do not suffer [Sin] or [Wages of Sin]. They instead suffer transcendent damage from this ability in place of necrotic damage and suffer an additional instance of [Penance] and instances of [Penance] do not drop off for a short period.
  
  - [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  
  - [Price of Absolution] (affliction, holy): Suffer transcendent damage for each instance of [Sin] cleansed from you.
  - 
  - [Wages of Sin] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Suffer necrotic damage over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  - 
  - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
- 

Punish was representative of the way Jason fought at his current rank. In the early stages of a fight, it added more necrotic damage than ever. Once Jason had cleansed an enemy, replacing the necrotic afflictions with the transcendent damage penance affliction, the special attack changed to support it.

The cyclops reacted to Jason's attacks, wheeling in place, but his size was an impediment when Jason stayed close. He kicked at Jason, who easily dodged, and tried to back off to leverage his eyebeam. Jason stayed underfoot, frustrating the monoptical giant.

One of Jason's orbs had been destroyed by the first eyebeam attack but the other one was still floating around him. It moved over to the cyclops and vanished as it applied the affliction that caused the cyclops to start spawning butterflies.

- 
- [Harbinger of Doom] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Continually drain mana from the victim to conjure a butterfly that seeks out nearby enemies. The butterflies are incorporeal and deal disruptive-force damage in a small area when destroyed. Butterflies that contact enemies inflict one instance of each non-holy affliction present on the enemy it manifested from, including [Harbinger of Doom]. This effect cannot be cleansed while any other non-holy affliction is in effect. Additional instances can be accumulated. At the time of manifestation, one butterfly is generated for each instance of this affliction.
-

“Gordon,” Jason said and his familiar appeared. Four orbs manifested around Gordon instead of the usual six, with the two Jason had expended not yet recovered. Four was sufficient for Jason’s needs, however.

“Open it up,” Jason ordered.

One of the advancements Gordon had made at silver-rank was the ability to use any of his abilities via one type of orb, instead of having different orbs with individual functions. This meant that Gordon could use all four orbs to fire resonating-force beams at the building. Resonating-force was a damage type with superior armour-penetrating qualities and tore through non-magical concrete as easily as glass, opening the entire front of the building up as it threw out a cloud of concrete dust, obscuring Jason from the cyclops.

Inside the building, most of the Cabal forces were gathered on the ground floor as the ghouls forced their way up. The Cabal members had already become aware of the events outside after some of the long-limbed people fled inside, and now the wall was stripped away by energy beams that passed right through it and swept over them as well. They rushed outside even as Gordon vanished back into Jason’s aura and Jason sank into the cyclops’ shadow. In the meantime, butterflies moved from the cyclops in the direction of the emerging crowd.

Jason emerged from one of Shade's bodies on the second floor, in a small janitorial storage room. On the other side of the closed door, he could hear ghouls rushing about.

“Gordon, if any of the people outside decide to run for it, have the butterflies leave them alone,” Jason said. One of Gordon’s orbs briefly glowed a brighter blue, signalling his acknowledgement.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “Some Cabal members are climbing the exterior of the building and may circumvent the Network defenders to reach the people who have yet to reach the upper-floor magical defences.”

“Many of them?”

"Only a few on each side of the building, all iron or bronze-rank. Some are less interested in breaching the building as much as escaping the fight between you and the cyclops. I recommend deploying Gordon."

“How cool was that cyclops?” Jason asked. “That eyebeam?”

“I think, perhaps, you should try and maintain focus, Mr Asano.”

“What do you say, Gordon? Want to play window washer?”

Gordon flashed a blue orb and passed right through the wall.

“What’s the situation?” Jason asked.

"The gold-rank vampire seems to have scattered his new lesser vampires amongst the ghouls," Shade explained, having scouted the building as Jason confronted the cyclops. "The vampire's ability to directly control this many ghouls appears to be limited. I believe the lesser vampires are acting as sub-commanders to keep the horde under control."

"What am I dealing with on the other side of this door?"

"A number of ghouls led by one of the lesser vampires tried to ascend the stairs nearby but the stairs collapsed on them. They are forming a pile and climbing up over one another. The lesser vampire is someone I recognised from a network tactical team. We've worked with him in the past."

"Let's go save him, then," Jason said. "I'm just sorry we can't do anything for the rest of them."

Jason opened the door and stepped out into an open office space full of toppled cubicle walls teeming with ghouls. Only the closest ones noticed Jason's arrival until he raised his arm, palm outward, and strafed the room with leeches that erupted from his hand.

This quickly drew the attention of the lesser vampire, easy to pick out for not being a twisted, animate corpse. The vampire dashed through the ghouls as Jason raised his other hand in his direction.

*"Feed me your sins."*

\*\*\*

Nigel's tactical section checked the bodies of the long-limbed creatures sprawled on the stairs to confirm they were dead.

"What are these things?" Woolzy wondered out loud. "I thought the Cabal were all myths and fairy tales and such. What's this meant to be? Once upon a time, Stretch Armstrong turned out to be kind of a prick?"

"Is anyone else feeling that aura?" Darce asked. "It dropped down on us just as we started shooting."

"Yeah," Nigel said. "Asano is here."

"You don't suppose he's chucked in with the Cabal, do you?" Woolzy asked. "I heard he was friendly with one of their vamps and we did kill his brother. And his girlfriend."

"That was the Seppos and their bloody cat-four bloke, not us," Orange said.

"Are you willing to bet your life on him making that distinction?" Digit asked.

"If Asano was against us, his aura would feel a lot worse than arrogant," Nigel said.

"Jonno, Thorny, check the exterior for more of those things."

They had shattered the glass wall attacking the things climbing up the outside. Thorny gripped Jonno's arm as he leaned out to check the exterior, only to duck back in. One of the creatures fell past the window, almost taking him with it. He poked his head out again out, looking up to see a floating entity attacking the creatures clinging to the wall with energy beams.

"Asano's here, alright," he said. "I don't think we have to worry about the climbers."

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Shade had scouted out each of the lesser vampires, which meant that Jason could jump directly to them. The problem was that after cleaning them he was left with a weakened, confused and vulnerable essence user, right in the midst of the enemy. He missed the presence of Kaito, who would have allowed him to throw them right out a window to be extracted by helicopter. He started locking them into storage cupboards, copy rooms and any other place he could find not overrun with ghouls.

The only place in the building Jason avoided was the section of the third floor where he could sense Farrah, Dawn and the vampire. The ghouls were pushing further and further up the building, with Jason appearing and disappearing as he needed. On the eighth floor, he encountered some of the Network defenders, helping Koen Waters secure a stairwell being overrun with ghouls. Colin started at the top of the stairs and began devouring his way down, enhanced by the flame power he received from Farrah.

Once Gordon returned, Jason had him use his resonating-force beams to bore a hole in the floor from the eighth floor all the way down to the ground. The butterflies that had multiplied on the Cabal members of the ground floor used the hole to start flooding up through the building, going to work on the ghouls.

\*\*\*

Jason arrived at the spot where Dawn and Farrah had what was left of the vampire. Farrah had called him over through the party chat but he hadn't arrived until most of the ghouls were cleared out. Once the Network teams could move back down and retrieve their formerly-vampiric companions he had stashed around the building, Jason sought out Farrah and Dawn.

"Why haven't you finished this guy off?" Jason asked after they exchanged stories. "If you think keeping him alive because he might be useful later is a good idea, you need to watch more movies."

"A vampire is not alive," Dawn said. "Its body is a vessel for stolen life force."

"Okay," Jason said.

“This vampire’s stolen life force is infused with reality core energy. I suspect that if you drain the life force from vampires, you may be able to absorb that energy yourself, accelerating the advancement of your abilities.”

“Hold up,” Jason said. “You mean I can use this vampire like a monster core?”

“Very broadly speaking,” Dawn said. “I’m not entirely certain it will work but if it does, it will only be with vampires, who do not truly own the life force they contain.”

“I don’t want to do that. Monster cores mess up your ability to advance without using more monster cores.”

“Reality cores have the same effect,” Dawn said, “albeit to a lesser degree. In this instance, however, the vampires serve as a method of refining the energy. Their bodies should have already soaked up the elements that stain the soul and impede non-core advancement, like filters.”

“Should have?” Jason asked. “That sounds a lot like a guess. You did just say the words ‘I’m not entirely certain,’ which do not fill me with confidence.”

“There is a very good chance that there are more of these vampires than anyone realises,” Dawn said, “and very few of them will be as weak as this one. If you can get even a little stronger, that may prove critical going forward.”

“No,” Farrah said. “It’s not worth risking your entire future over. Will he advance any faster than if he were using cores?”

“Almost certainly not,” Dawn said.

“Then why bother?” Farrah asked. “Advancing through silver-rank takes years. Eating a few vampires won’t make a big difference.”

“It does not have to be a big difference to be important,” Dawn said. “You are both still at the early stages of silver-rank, where your growth is at its fastest. Asano’s abilities are strong against vampires. Advancing them even a little will be to our advantage.”

“It’s easy to tell someone else to cripple their potential when you’re already diamond rank,” Farrah said.

“That’s enough,” Jason said. As the two women argued, his gaze hadn’t left the scorched, helpless vampire.

“Yes, Dawn’s asking me to take a crappy risk, but we all know what’s at stake. What’s the worst that can happen? I have to rank up using cores from now on? I’ll trade that for keeping the world safe.”

“You don’t even know if we need to go around fighting vampires,” Farrah argued.

“Even if there are a bunch of them out there, how does that affect our objectives?”

"Perhaps, not at all," Dawn said. "So long as you can convince Jason to not help people when there's an uprising of gold-rank vampires going on, we may not have an issue. Of course, if they learn about the door and its ability to access reality cores, they may come after us."

"It's my choice," Jason said, holding his hand over the vampire.

*"Your blood is not yours to keep but mine on which to feast."*

The life drain power was enough to finish the vampire.

- 
- You have absorbed refined reality energy. It will be applied to advance your least developed abilities. The purified nature of the energy will not impede your ability to advance through non-energy absorption methods.
  - 
  - You have absorbed insufficient energy to advance any of your abilities.
- 

Jason's tense shoulders slumped with relief.

"All good," he said. "Looks like I might want to hunt some vampires, if I get the chance."

"See?" Dawn said to Farrah. "I told you it would be fine."

"And I bet the odds looked great when you weren't the one taking the risk."

"What's done is done," Jason said. "It was my choice and it worked out, so there's no point arguing."

"You shouldn't have let her pressure you into it."

Jason laughed as he gave Farrah a reassuring smile.

"Do you think that she's enough to force me into a choice I don't want to make?" he asked. "If I can stand up to the Builder and I can stand up to the goddess of Knowledge, I can stand up to her."

Farrah frowned but gave a reluctant nod.

"Alright," Jason said turning back to the vampire. "Let's see if I can shake the last bit of sauce out of the bottle."

He held his hand out and cast another spell.

*"As your life was mine to reap, so your death is mine to harvest."*

The remnant life force within the vampire was drawn out and absorbed.

- 
- You have absorbed refined reality energy. It will be applied to advance your least developed abilities.
  - Ability [Verdict] had advanced from Silver 0 (93%) to Silver 0 (94%).
-

“Huh,” Jason said. “I think I’ll need to kill a lot of vampires.”



## Chapter 401

### It's Okay to Laugh

Jason, Dawn and Farrah looked at the burned, drained remains of the vampire lord Willoughby.

"I still don't like the risk you took draining him," Farrah said. "Now that it's done, though, at least one of us has a path to advancement."

Since reaching silver-rank, Jason and Farrah had both reached the limits of their early-stage growth spurt. Pushing into the mid and late stages of silver rank would be difficult so long as they remained on Earth. At lower ranks, confronting higher-rank monsters was a path to rapid advancement that Jason especially had taken advantage of, but that was less viable at silver.

Gold rank monsters were too powerful to casually confront, even for elite essence users. More well-rounded and with fewer exploitable weaknesses, many were even more dangerous than less-competent essence users of equivalent rank. Without a solid team of elites, going after gold-rank monsters was too risky.

The traditional path to gold involved confronting many silver-rank monsters, ideally those who could pose a greater challenge than average. Gold-rank proto-spaces could offer silver-rank monsters in large numbers and had started to sporadically appear, but not often enough.

Jason and Farrah would need to monopolise those spaces, which they didn't have time for, even if they didn't have to compete with the Network's strongest forces. After Makassar, even the fight over reality cores wasn't enough to distract the Network from descending on any gold-rank space with enough magically enhanced heavy ordnance to level a small town.

For these reasons, Jason and Farrah had given up on growing their power further until they returned to Farrah's world. The revelation that Jason could advance by treating vampires as monster cores gave Jason, at least, a means of advancement.

The biggest advantage of monster core advancement was that cores could be absorbed in larger quantities and slowly processed, compared to the constant need to seek out dangerous conflict. If Jason really could treat vampires like monster cores, then periodically hunting a few vampires before returning to the task at hand could pay off in half a year or so when his abilities grew stronger. Just ten or twenty percent further into silver rank would be a welcome jump in strength.

That did not mean they were about to go off looking for every vampire they could. Dawn and Farrah's victory was hard-fought, even with Dawn's diamond-rank experience and peak silver-rank power. They had the advantage of numbers and a lot of fire abilities, while the vampire's powers played little part. Other vampires would be stronger, which would make a hard fight even with the addition of Jason.

"We shouldn't go out of our way looking for vampires," Jason said. "We have our objective and I have a feeling that we'll be running into them one way or another."

"Agreed," Dawn said. "I believe that future encounters are inevitable, if only because we are unwilling to conscience their behaviour."

"Mr Asano," Shade said, one of his bodies emerging from Jason's shadow.

"Yes?" Jason asked.

"The ritual effect in the palace has ended," Shade said. "They're gone."

Jason bowed his head, his lips pressed tightly together. After a moment, he nodded. The only three bodies of Shade's that Jason hadn't brought into battle were the ones being possessed by Kaito, Asya and Greg.

"Thank you, Shade. And thank your dad, when you get the chance."

"The Reaper will not care," Shade said.

"I'd appreciate you doing it anyway."

\*\*\*

Koen Waters, Annabeth Tilden and a tactical team were standing on the eighth floor of the Network building, standing next to a neatly circular hole in the floor, some two metres across. It descended through the building, all the way down to the lobby.

"What do we do about the hole?" Koen asked.

"For now," Anna said, "we hope it didn't take out anything structurally necessary."

Anna's presence was the main reason for the security team since the ghouls had been eliminated and the surviving Cabal members had fled. A handful of ethereal blue and orange butterflies drifted up from the hole before dropping back down. They were overtly magical, with a glow to their vibrant colouration. There had previously been far more of the butterflies swarming the floors and reducing the ghouls to drained husks that were now scattered all through the building.

"How many dead?" Anna asked.

"We've only done eyeball estimates but we're looking at maybe two-hundred. Maybe more."

"That many?"

"We had a lot of staff on-site with the extra shifts we've been running," Koen said. "We managed to evacuate a lot of them upstairs but then there were the police and military. The Cabal killed quite a lot of them before they all pulled back, and the vampire animated them all."

"Do we know where the vampire is? Or Asano? I'm assuming one killed the other."

"We think they fought on the third floor. Asano was brief when we encountered him and he told us about recovering our people and hiding them. The fight seems to be over because we can't feel either aura, so I've sent a section to check it out."

"How are we doing on getting those people back?"

"Our sweeper teams have found them and are bringing them up as we speak."

"Good," Anna said. "After what happened, we need to subject them to every medical test and magical healing known to humankind."

Koen's second-in-command, Manesh, was watching the hole and spoke up.

"Ditto, we have movement."

Koen went to look over the edge of the hole and then took several steps back as a dark figure swept up through the hole and landed in front of him. Jason arrived on dark wings, Dawn and Farrah quickly following with their wings of flame.

"G'day, Koen, Anna," Jason greeted as he pushed the hood of his cloak back. "Did you find all your people?"

"You beat the vampire?"

"No, the ladies were the stars of that show while I played ghoulish janitor. Did you find your people I stashed away?"

"We're bringing them back now," Koen said. "Thank you for stepping in, especially after how our organisation has treated you."

"No worries."

"Thank you," Anna echoed while looking curiously at Dawn.

"Last time I saw you," Anna told her, "you were normal rank."

"Coming back from the dead more powerful than ever is kind of our thing," Jason said. "How are you going to respond to the Cabal's attack?"

Anna glowered.

"We lost a lot of people," she said. "Your intervention prevented the loss of many critical personnel, so our ability to respond to proto-spaces is undiminished. Step one is to recover any isolated survivors while making sure we can still do our job. Protecting the country from proto-spaces and preventing monster waves is the first priority."

Jason nodded his approval.

"What we've lost," Anna continued, "is a huge portion of the administrative staff that allows an organisation as large as ours to function. A lot of our people died today and step two is counting the dead and securing our magical infrastructure. Also making sure that the hole in the middle of our building won't cause it to collapse."

"Maybe we can look at it as an opportunity," Koen's second, Manesh said.

"What do mean?" Anna asked.

"You could install an epic fireman's pole."

"Manesh, a lot of people just died," Anna said.

"Seriously, mate," Jason said. "I love a fireman's pole as much as the next bloke, but time and place."

"This coming from you," Farrah said.

"So, what's step three?" Jason asked Anna, forcibly changing the subject.

"After we make sure we're operational, it's time to clean house properly. I'm going to dissolve the steering committee and take charge personally."

"You can do that?" Farrah asked.

"She has the support of the tactical department," Koen said.

"Getting blindsided like this shouldn't have happened," Anna said. "It would take someone at the steering committee level to poke just the right holes in our security net without being noticed. We've been worried about the committee for a while, with some throwing in with the leadership faction and now others selling us out to the Cabal. The International Committee has already fractured, take in those local IC people who went against the leadership and restructure."

"That's bold," Farrah said."

"We're also going to work with some of the Cabal that split off because they don't want to work with the old vampires," Anna said. "Craig Vermillion is running his own splinter faction. Between us, him and the EOA members that left, back when they realised their group caused the monster waves, we're talking about a whole new group, with members from every major magical faction."

"That's oddly optimistic, in the middle of all this mess," Jason said. "Are there any more old vampires in Australia?"

"No," Koen said. "He came over with the earliest colonial forces. My family has been part of what is now the Network since long before they arrived. I have family records of his being a menace until he grew too strong and went into hibernation."

Koen Waters was an Aboriginal Australian. Jason was startled to hear that the network predated colonisation and curious as to how that worked given Australia's history of violence and oppression to the indigenous population, but it was far from the time.

"Our contacts in the parts of the Cabal not on team ancient vampire confirm that this vampire was the only one in Australia," Anna said. "We're low priority compared to Asia and North America, but Europe has the strongest concentration, though. The southern hemisphere is mostly free of them, with the biggest concentration in South America."

"Small mercies," Jason said. "How are you going to respond to the Cabal?"

"It's too early to say," Anna said. "They declared war today and hitting hard while they're on the back foot has emotional appeal, but as I said, our priority has to be preventing monster waves."

"The transformation events are bad enough," Koen said.

"We're certainly going to stop fighting over reality cores, now," Anna said. "I suspect the Cabal will too, at least for the immediacy. The EOA have been the poor cousins in that fight but it looks like the door may be open for them now, at least for a while."

"Great," Jason said. "They're using the cores to create boost injections, allowing their superheroes to juice up to gold-rank temporarily."

"We know," Anna said. "We all saw your encounter with the EOA in Venezuela."

"You killed them with your brain," Manesh said. "It was scary as shi—"

He stopped talking at a glare from Koen.

"So, what about you?" Anna asked. "You never used that information I gave you."

"Too much risk," Jason said. "Too many variables. That's why no one else was willing to take a shot, right?"

"We thought you might be willing to try."

"I almost did," Jason said. "You gave it to me at my brother's funeral. Made me feel like I have to or I'm letting him down. Kind of a prick move."

"I'm sorry," Anna said.

"No you're not," Jason said. "I don't have to read your emotions to know that, although I can. It's time for us to go."

"Wait," Anna said. "I think Vermillion will want to contact you, once he knows you're in the country," Anna said. "Are you still using a phone or did you ditch it?"

"I've still got my phone," Jason said. "The anti-tracking magic makes the roaming charges worse, somehow, but I still have about five million bucks left. I sank most of the cash from that gold you helped me flog off into building Asano village but I stopped paying attention to money a while back."

Anna took a notepad and pen from her jacket, scribbled a number down, tore out the page and handed it to Jason.

“Vermillion’s burner.”

“Thanks.”

\*\*\*

A portal opened on the tower rooftop at the centre of Jason’s cloud palace. Jason, Farrah and Dawn stepped through and Jason wandered to the balustrade, looking out over the ocean.

“They’re gone,” he said as Farrah moved up beside him.

“Yeah,” Farrah said. “You alright?”

“I am,” he said. “I’m kind of annoyed that they used their final message to the living to tell me to get over myself.”

Jason and Farrah shared a look and started laughing.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I feel lighter, somehow. Getting to say goodbye. Maybe it’s okay to laugh when you can, even in the dark days.”

“I think that might be when it’s most important,” Farrah said.

Jason went and found all the people he had brought to his cloud palace, left somewhat at a loss by his departure. Some had gone off to explore the palace, although most remained in the hall where the ritual had been conducted. He rounded everyone up and then portalled them back to Asano Village before putting the cloud palace back in its flask.

The families of Greg and Asya were no longer as contentious towards Jason. That wasn’t the same as forgiveness but they’d been admonished by their dead loved ones and saw the magnitude of Jason’s resources. It was one thing to see him on the news and another to experience it for themselves. Between the portal, the cloud palace and the ability to call up the dead, they realised that some fights weren’t worth picking.

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Once all the people were sent home, Jason wanted to leave before his presence called trouble down on Asano Village. Before that, though, he called Vermillion on the number Anna gave him.

“Oh, hey,” Vermillion said, sounding distracted. Jason could hear the roar of a car engine in the background.

“You sound busy,” Jason said.

“Little bit,” Craig said. “Didn’t want to miss you, though.”

“Anna gave me your number. Said you might want to hear from me.”

“Definitely.”

The sound of gunfire came through the phone.

“You aren’t playing a video game, are you?” Jason asked.

“Uh, no, I’m not,” Craig said. “I don’t suppose you’re anywhere near Sydney?”

## Chapter 402

### Dignified Moment

"This is not going to plan, Craig," Franklin said, sitting in the front passenger seat as Vermillion was driving.

"You think?" Vermillion asked wildly as he kicked off what was left of the bullet-riddled, driver-side door.

The streets of Bankstown had been transformed into a realm of stone and fire. The buildings were made from large bricks in dark shades of brown, red and grey. The cars parked on the street had been turned into stone carriages that a team of horses would be hard-pressed to budge. The car Vermillion was driving, along with the ones chasing it, had been brought in from the outside.

The streets they drove on, oddly, were still flat asphalt. Due to Bankstown being abandoned by all but the Cabal, this allowed for the cars to take a breakneck pace as they belted through the streets.

"Bryan, did you find that stuff?" Vermillion asked.

"Come on, Vermillion," complained the vampire in the back seat.

"Seriously, Bryan? This is not the time!"

"But it's never the time, is it?" Bryan complained. Vermillion was about to fire back a retort when a fresh stream of bullets pierced through the car, one of which hit him in the back of the head.

"Damn it, Bryan."

Bryan didn't say anything.

"Bryan!"

"You already have a cool vampire name," Bryan complained.

"I don't have a cool vampire name, Bryan. It's just my surname."

"Well, my surname is Slansky. No one is going to fear Slansky the vampire."

"My name's Frank."

"And nobody fears you, Frank."

"Oh, you might be surprised," Vermillion said.

"Why would I want to be feared?" Frank asked. "Have you ever tried to find four for a bridge game when everyone thinks you're going to eat them?"

An arrow shot through the gap where the back window used to be, buried itself in Vermillion's shoulder and then exploded, blasting the headrest from his seat and leaving



his arm dangling from a strip of flesh. Blood spilled out, but instead of falling away, it transformed into flesh, restoring the massive wound in moments.

“God damn it, Bryan,” Vermillion yelled. “Give me the damn stuff.”

“I’m not responding to that name.”

“Are you...”

Craig bit back his words.

“Night Stalker,” he said through gritted teeth. “Can you please give Frank the stuff?”

“Of course, Vermillion,” Bryan said, holding out a crude ball of what looked and felt like putty. “All you had to do was ask.”

There was a thump as the roof bent inward under weight and a pair of huge, taloned claws pierced the roof as some manner of creature landed on it. Frank reached down by his feet and retrieved a sawn-off, double-barrel shotgun with glowing runes carved into the barrels. He casually pointed it at the roof and pulled both triggers, blasting most of the roof off. With a horrific screech, the gargoyle-like creature that had been on it flew off with its long, leathery wings.

“Where did you get that?” Vermillion asked.

“One of those Network guys at the storage facility,” Frank said. “Anyway, you’re the one that stole their car. Maybe that’s why those Network guys are chasing us so hard.”

One of the reasons the car had held up under repeated magical attacks was that of all the cars they could have stolen for the getaway, they found and took the only magical one.

“What were Network people even doing there?” Bryan asked. “Shouldn’t they be defending their headquarters right now?”

“I don’t think those are Network people anymore,” Vermillion said. “The Network is fractured as badly as us, maybe even worse. I’d heard talk of the higher-ups trying to recruit essence magicians but I didn’t think they’d have gotten anyone this strong. Are you still holding onto the stuff? Give it to Frank.”

“What do you want putty for anyway?” Bryan asked, holding out the ball again.

“Frank’s bloodline lets him absorb materials and pass their properties onto his blood,” Vermillion explained.

“Why would you want your blood to be like putty?” Bryan asked.

Frank bit his finger, drawing blood that flowed out of the wound and over the ball in his hand, which was swiftly melted down and absorbed, even the spilled blood crawling back into his skin. Frank then bit his finger right off before plucking it from his mouth and

tossing it out the window. When one of the pursuing cars drove over it, an explosion underneath sent the car rolling out of the chase. Franks finger quickly grew back.

“You really thought that was putty, Bryan?” Vermillion asked.

“Night Stalker!”

“Night Stalker doesn’t even sound like a vampire name,” Vermillion said. “It sounds like a rapist from the eighties.”

“But not an actual rapist,” Frank said. “More like a rapist from one of those daytime TV movies where a housewife learns that handsome men are all terrible.”

“You can both go fu—”

He was cut off when Vermillion swerved hard and Night Stalker’s head smashed the car’s last intact window.

“Sorry,” Vermillion said. “That pothole had lava in it.”

\*\*\*

Jason, Dawn and Farrah stepped out of a portal near the border of Bankstown. Jason hadn’t been able to send them to a familiar location like the airport because there were no familiar locations left. Bankstown had been transformed both physically and magically, down to the smallest particle.

“I think this is the right street,” Jason said, extending his senses. Dawn did the same while Farrah rolled her shoulders, shifting her body. She was still appreciating that she no longer suffered disorientation from teleportation after gaining the astral affinity of an outworlder.

“There they are,” Jason said. “Oh, crikey.”

Jason sensed a large number of magical auras moving at speed, along with a lot of overt magic being thrown around.

“Are those magic guns I’m sensing being used?” Jason asked.

“I believe they are,” Dawn said.

“He must have some Network people chasing him,” Jason, tilting his head as if trying to hear a distant sound more clearly. “Yeah, those are essence abilities going off. Silver rank, damn. Who did Craig get cranky?”

“Maybe we should go find out,” Farrah suggested.

“Right, yes,” Jason said. “Shade, if you would?”

Five Shade bodies appeared from Jason's shadow and merged together, taking on the form of a huge, four-seater car. It had sleek, hypercar lines and a smattering of glowing white embellishments on what was, of course, a glossy black body.

“Okay, I’m going to get sued,” Jason said. “This is a straight-up Batmobile.”

"I could add non-trademarked badging," Shade offered, "but you would need a simple and elegant logo. Your personal crest does not translate into a clean, easily iconic symbol."

"Are you saying I need a superhero emblem?" Jason asked.

"It would help," Shade said.

"Can we please go?" Dawn asked. "We need to go catch up with them."

"Good point," Jason said, peering at the car. "Which part is the door?"

\*\*\*

"Where exactly are we going?" Frank asked as the careening chase continued.

"Away," Vermillion said, swerving the car around a corner as they rushed through Bankstown's empty streets.

"I don't like 'away' being the most solid plan we have," Frank said.

An explosion to the right of the car tore up asphalt.

"You may have missed it, Frank, but even just 'away' is turning out to be a high bar."

"We don't even have the blood and cores, though," Night Stalker said. "We're the decoy car."

"They don't know that," Vermillion said. "Do you not understand what a decoy is?"

The gargoyle-like creature swept down once more but was met with a bloody mist that Night Stalker spat out and it backed off. Vermillion was about to turn the car hard into another corner when he was startled by something popping up in the middle of his eyeline.

"What the hell?"

---

➤ You have received a party invitation from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

---

Vermillion moved his head to look around the obstruction but it kept moving to the middle of his view and he almost ran the car into a stone carriage parked on the side of the road.

"What are you doing?" Frank asked.

"Yes, god damn it," Vermillion yelled.

"Yes, what?" Frank asked.

Missing the corner and then almost crashing had allowed the cars pursuing them to close in. Frank and Night Stalker were gearing up to fend off fresh attacks when a series of what looked like orange lasers started laying into the other vehicles, slicing them up like pieces of cake.

"What's doing that?" Frank asked.

Watching out the back window, Night Stalker saw the source of the attacks.

"It looks like a space cloud on top of the Batmobile shooting lasers."

The lack of cars didn't entirely end the pursuit as the most powerful Cabal members and essence users who had been in the cars gave chase on foot, moving at speeds comparable to a car. There was also the large gargoyle creature still flying after them.

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Gordon made short work of the non-magical cars, although the people inside proved more resilient as they sprung from the wreckage to continue pursuing Vermillion's car.

"I'm surprised Craig's car is still running," Jason said. "It must be one of the Network's magically-enhanced ones, right?"

"I imagine so," Farrah said.

Vermillion's car was a wreck on wheels, missing two of the doors and most of the roof, the rest riddled with damage. The fact that all four wheels were intact was too much of a miracle to be anything but magic.

Jason and Dawn both snapped their heads to the left at the same time.

"That may be trouble," Dawn said.

"I'll deal with it," Jason said. "You two make sure our enthusiastic joggers don't run down his car. He almost crashed back there, so I'm not sure he's the best driver."

Farrah strained her senses and picked up what the others had already sensed.

"A conjured Vehicle. Vermillion isn't the only one bringing in reinforcements."

Vehicle specialists were more common on Earth than Farrah's world. Many were flyers like Kaito and his helicopter, but land-based vehicles were much more the norm, trading off the capability to fly for an increase in combat power. The common thread for vehicle specialists was that their vehicle-based powers were awkward to use but proportionally more powerful than more convenient power sets.

Australia didn't have a lot of vehicle users, compared to China who boasted a higher percentage of them than any other major nation. Combined with China's population, this made for a powerful force. Jason had occasionally seen them in action in large, multi-national actions like Makassar.

Because of Australia's deficit, Jason quickly guessed the identity of the silver ranker coming his way in a huge armoured personnel carrier. It wasn't someone he'd worked with personally but Kaito's specialised training had been carried out by the senior vehicle specialist.

Jason opened the car door and hopped out, using weight reduction to drift a moment and slow down before dropping his feet to the asphalt. Gordon waited on his left, with

Shade on his right. A short time later, a huge, futuristic armoured vehicle roared around the corner before slowing down to a stop.

“Mr Asano,” an amplified voice boomed from the vehicle. “I have no quarrel with you. Please walk away and don’t involve yourself in this affair.”

“Andreas Kosmopoulos,” Jason responded, his own voice booming in a trick of voice projection. “You’re chasing a friend of mine. I’m not going to let that go.”

“He stole from us.”

“Putting aside that the goods in question were plundered from reality itself and that none of you have a right to them,” Jason said, “he stole from the Cabal. Last time I checked, you were a member of the Network. Brisbane branch, if I remember rightly.”

“These are dangerous days and the old order is breaking down,” Kosmopoulos responded. “If the ship is sinking, you find anything you can that floats.”

“You’ve grabbed an anchor, Andreas, not driftwood. Let go, before clinging to it drags you under.”

“And what would you know, Asano? Running around the world, not having to watch everything you’ve come to rely on crumble and break. You were never in the Network. You never understood what it meant to be a part of it. How much was lost when it crumbled. Human civilisation is over; people just don’t know it yet. Now it’s about monsters claiming the biggest pile of the rubble that they can.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” Jason said. “I haven’t given up quite yet and I’ll never give up on my friends.”

“I know you’re powerful, Asano, but this is a bad fight for you. Only a fool fights a vehicle specialist on the road. My vehicle has no blood to poison or flesh to rot. It’s shielded against teleportation and intangible creatures, so neither you nor your familiars can breach it.”

A panel in the massive vehicle’s roof opened up and a huge rotary cannon emerged.

"It has weapons you cannot endure," Kosmopoulos continued. "The matchup is bad for you, Asano. Leave."

“Your one of those people that sees a guy on the TV and thinks ‘I could take him,’ aren’t you?”

“Very well, Asano. Bear the consequences of your actions.”

The rotary cannon spooled up and started spitting bullets. Gordon turned into a swirling nebula and dashed away before reforming, while Jason ducked into Shade and vanished. The gun started tracking Gordon, but six orange beams bore down on the

weapon and sheared it off. A force field snapped into place around the vehicle and a new gun that immediately started firing was conjured in place of the damaged one.

Gordon sank into the ground, avoiding the bullets, and started popping up in random places to blast six blue beams at the force field, only to vanish into the ground as the gun rapidly swung in his direction.

The silver-rank bullets fired specialty ammunition that added disruptive-force to the impact of the bullets, ideal for an incorporeal creature like Gordon. Sensitive to the dangerous damage type, he used dashes to avoid them. In between dashes, he fired bursts of the same damage: blue beams of pure disruptive-force that were highly effective against the force field.

The armoured vehicle started moving again, heading once more in pursuit of the other vehicles. As the force field collapsed, Jason appeared from behind a stone carriage and used his cloak's weight reduction to leap high into the air. His shadow arms reached out, grabbed the now-unshielded APC and dragged him to it. Its exterior immediately electrified and he tumbled, twitching off the back to face plant the street as the vehicle roared away.

"Not my most dignified moment," he muttered into the asphalt.

## Chapter 403

### When Someone is Under Your Gun

Jason pushed himself to his feet with a groan, his body still tingling from the electrical attack. The magical APC, looking like something from a sci-fi movie, had left him behind and was roaring around a corner in pursuit of the others.

"It's possible that you have been looking down on Earth's essence users too much," Shade suggested.

"I was thinking the same thing," Jason agreed. "If you would?"

Shade took the form of a motorcycle and Jason climbed aboard as Gordon disappeared into Jason. Two of Gordon's orbs appeared in his place and started orbiting around Jason as the motorcycle took off. The APC was fast but the much smaller bike was both faster and more manoeuvrable, leading Jason to soon catch up.

A machine gun emerged from a recessed panel atop the APC and started firing backwards, one of the orbs turning into a shield to intercept the bullets. The disruptive-force added to the damage quickly destabilised the shield but Jason started swerving left and right to buy more time before it collapsed.

The shield collapsed and the second orb took its place, although it, too, was swiftly chewed through. Bullets started hitting Jason and his cloak intercepted the attacks, but as with the shields, the disruptive force on the bullets was effective at negating much of his cloak's protective power. That left a good portion of the kinetic impact to slam into Jason.

Without a bunch of handy minions to afflict, Jason was at his weakest with both his physical fortitude and regenerative powers at their lowest point. That being said, at silver-rank the lowest point was still very good and Jason endured the barrage to draw closer to the vehicle.

"Let's give him some more targets," Jason said and six more bikes appeared alongside him, with Shade's bodies riding them. Jason conjured up starlight cloaks on each and they started weaving amongst each other, making which one was him harder to pick out. The machine gun started spraying them all, but with the bullets more diffuse, the cloaks were better able to endure them.

Jason cast a spell at the APC but as he did, the force field Gordon had torn down earlier snapped back into place around the vehicle.

*"Bleed for me."*

- You have afflicted target with [Necrotoxin].
  - You have afflicted target with [Sacrificial Victim].
  - You have afflicted target with [Bleeding].
  
  - Target is fully shielded.
  
  - [Blood From a Stone] does not take effect.
  - [Necrotoxin] does not take effect.
  - [Sacrificial Victim] does not take effect.
  - [Bleeding] does not take effect.
- 

“Bloody hell.”

Jason had been spoiled by an aspect common to his spells, which was affecting targets directly, without an intermediary like a projectile. This was common in low-impact spells, the signature of affliction specialists like himself. Powers that provided comprehensive shields, however, were highly effective against such spells. Sadly for Jason, such powers were common, especially amongst healers. Jason had learned the frustration of that in the mock battles between his team and that of Prince Valdis of the Mirror Kingdom.

“Go again, Gordon.”

The nebulous familiar appeared and jumped out ahead of the APC in a series of dashes before once more blasting the vehicle's force field with blue beams. The front-firing rotary canon reappeared to harass him, preventing Gordon from constantly barraging the force field. Gordon also had two fewer beams, due to the orbs Jason had consumed as shields.

Seeing the limited effectiveness of his approach, Gordon instead fired two of his remaining six orbs at the shield, the orbs coming into contact just before they reached it and exploding with blue energy. The powerful blast of disruptive-force caused the APC's shield to immediately collapse again but Gordon was largely disarmed until his orbs recovered, which would take a minute for each. He fell back to be subsumed once more into Jason.

The APC had not been idle while Gordon worked. A roof panel slid aside and a stream of micro missiles fired up into the air before turning back and raining down on Jason and the Shades just as Gordon returned.

“Is this a bloody anime?” Jason decried as the bikes spread out. Gordon's last two orbs manifested beside Jason and started firing orange beams to intercept the missiles, the pinpoint beams intercepting the ones tracking Jason himself. The bulk of the projectiles hammered down on the Shades, however, rocking them with explosions.



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Inside the APC, Andreas Kosmopoulos was watching the rear monitor where the chasing motorcycles had disappeared into a dust cloud as the missiles blasted the road.

“Did we get him?” asked the other person in the APC, a Cabal member named Javier.

“No,” Andreas said. “There’s no way that Jason Asano went down from that.”

The driver’s station in the APC was a futuristic command station with multiple screens and glowing control panels. There were no vulnerable windows in the vehicle, the exterior monitored through a series of external cameras. Asano was frustratingly hard to pin down, the vehicle’s normally excellent tracking systems having trouble targeting him. Even his image on the cameras was something of a blur, and the heat tracking wasn’t able to pick him up in the dust cloud.

Andreas glanced at the recharge time on the shield. One of his most critical defensive measures, it had now been rapidly brought down twice. His only consolation was that he was confident in the resilience of his vehicle. While Asano’s powers were famously destructive to life, the APC had no blood to bleed and no flesh to rot.

The conjured vehicle of a true specialist like Kaito or Andreas differed from most conjured items. The APC was much more powerful than something like Jason’s dagger but it held commensurate weaknesses. It was critical to many of Andreas’ other abilities that were either diminished or didn’t function at all without it. The biggest drawback was that once destroyed, there was a considerable cooldown before it could be called up again. There were other conjured vehicles he could use but these would only be lesser placeholders.

On the rear monitor, Asano emerged from the dust cloud. His decoy bikes were gone but he appeared unharmed. Andreas was retasking the rear gun when the damage report monitor started flashing red.

“MULTIPLE ABNORMAL CONDITIONS DETECTED,” came the APC’s mechanical voice.

“INTRINSIC NATURE COMPROMISED.”

“Intrinsic nature compromised?” Andreas wondered aloud. His APC had been subject to all manner of attacks over the years but this was something completely new.

“Andreas,” Javier called out in a panicked voice. “What’s that?”

A red liquid was leaking from between the spot where two wall panels joined.

“Some kind of mechanical fluid, probably,” Andreas said. “Asano is using some kind of attack I’ve never seen before.”

“ADDITIONAL ABNORMAL CONDITIONS DETECTED. INTRINSIC NATURE FURTHER COMPROMISED.”

Javier transformed into a wolfman, occupying more of the interior space but the APC was designed for moving groups of people. He sniffed at the liquid. Meanwhile, Andreas tried to get to the bottom of the continuing alarms.

“Define error ‘intrinsic nature compromised,’” he commanded.

“MECHANICAL SYSTEMS ARE NOW SUBJECT TO BIOLOGICAL VULNERABILITIES ON MULTIPLE PARAMETERS.”

“What does that mean?” Andreas asked.

“It means that your vehicle is bleeding,” Javier growled with his wolf mouth.

“It doesn’t have any blood,” Andreas said.

“I don’t think the guy who fought a zombie army with magic butterflies really cares.”

\*\*\*

Vermillion’s stolen car was being pursued by multiple silver-rankers on foot. Three were vampires, including the one that had transformed into the gargoyle-like creature harassing them from the air. The other two were essence users, poached by the Cabal.

Vermillion’s stolen car had endured a lot of abuse but the pursuers had avoided using their most powerful attacks for fear of damaging the stolen goods, not realising those goods were not in the car at all. Finally, the car succumbed to a death by a thousand cuts and the engine gave out, the car slowing to a stop in the middle of the street.

A new black car dashed up, skidding to a halt in between the bullet-riddled car and the people chasing it. Dawn and Farrah stepped out, facing off against the pursuers. Seeing that Vermillion and the others in the broken car were not running, the pursuers slowed down to face off with the new arrivals. Vermillion, Frank and Night Stalker moved out to stand with Dawn.

“Farrah,” Craig greeted. “It’s been a while.”

The two essence users and the two vampires on foot came to a stop. The gargoyle-like creature flew down and transformed into a naked man.

“Larry,” Frank admonished. “Put on some damn pants.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do, traitor,” Larry said. “Besides, the ladies might like what they see.”

Dawn and Farrah looked Larry up and down, shared a glance and both smirked derisively.

“Hey...” Larry said, moving his hands to cover himself before turning back into a leathery monster.

One of the essence users hadn’t shifted his gaze from Farrah.

"I've been wondering about you for a long time, Hurin," he said. "Coming here, acting like you're so much better than us. Teaching us how to use our powers as if we're ignorant primitives. You're supposed to be so great; I'd like to see it for myself."

Farrah conjured her obsidian armour and jagged sword.

"Happy to oblige," she said.

Farrah had never been plagued by Jason's self-doubt and fears of moral decay. If someone wanted to make themselves her enemy, she would cut them down and sleep like a baby that night.

"It doesn't have to get violent," the other essence user said. "Just give us what you took and we can all walk away."

"The hell we can," one of the vampires spat. "You think they can just take from us and walk away?"

"Their vampires are second-grade weaklings," another vampire said. "Why make concessions when we are stronger?"

Each side had two essence users and three vampires, but the three Cabal vampires were silver-rank while Vermillion, Franklin and Night Stalker were only bronze.

"I hate to break it to you, but you got duped," Vermillion told them. "You chased the decoy. The blue blood and the reality cores are long gone."

"Enough talk," the first essence user said, raising his arm. An obsidian wall raised up in his face, which shattered as the lightning blast from his arm struck it. The shattered fragments then rocketed toward the essence user in a storm of razor-sharp stone. Dawn timed the casting of a spell to activate right as the essence user was distracted and he didn't notice the magic circle appearing under his feet. As the stone storm passed, webbing shot up from the circle to swiftly mummify him and Farrah smoothly followed up with a spell of her own.

*"Fire bolt."*

A blazing orb shot from Farrah's hand towards the essence user mummified in webbing. The webbing ignited immediately, throwing off an intense heat as it burned. Even so, it was being consumed slowly and kept the essence user bound as he had to force his way free.

"Oh, that's nice," Farrah said, admiring Dawn's spell as her fire bolt chained to the other essence user and the vampires. One quick spell was far from enough to deter silver-rankers, even if vampires were more vulnerable to fire. Their skin burning, they lunged forward into the wall that was Farrah and Dawn, the two women proving as impassable as a steel barrier.

One of the vampires was trapped in more threads that shot up from the ground, immediately igniting from Farrah's flames still burning on him. Another found Farrah's whip-sword wrapping around him, the obsidian fragments piercing his skin and the lava cord searing his flesh. The Vermillion and his companions teamed up to fend off Larry, the flying monstrosity.

Bankstown was now supernaturally volcanic, which suited Farrah just fine. There was a pyroclastic flow running alongside the road and she dragged the vampire wrapped in her sword in that direction.

"This is going to be fun."

\*\*\*

"CATASTROPHIC SYSTEM FAILURE," the APC announced amongst a constant stream of warning messages.

"Your machine has a penchant for the obvious," Javier growled. The APC was melting around them, the walls were dripping black, poisoned blood from panels starting to look more like distressed flesh than metal as it fell off in gobbets. Andreas was trying every weapon ability he had while feeding as much mana as it would take into the self-repair system. The APC continued to let out warnings.

"SELF-REPAIR HAS NEGATED CONDITION 'BLEEDING' AND WILL RESUME NORMAL FUNCTION. CONDITION 'BLEEDING' HAS BEEN APPLIED. SELF-REPAIR SYSTEM DIVERTING RESOURCES TO NEGATE CONDITION 'BLEEDING.' SELF-REPAIR HAS NEGATED CONDITION 'BLEEDING' AND WILL RESUME NORMAL FUNCTION. CONDITION 'BLEEDING' HAS BEEN APPLIED. SELF-REPAIR SYSTEM DIVERTING RESOURCES..."

Andreas slapped his hand on the mute button. The rapidly degrading state of the APC was affecting the weapon systems but there were still enough to hammer Asano with bullets a flamethrower and even the occasional rocket-propelled grenade. He watched in frustration and disbelief as Asano stopped avoiding the attacks, only needing to periodically call up a new motorcycle as the one he was riding became damaged. Asano himself seemed invincible.

"Is that guy immortal?"

\*\*\*

With afflictions applied and his Inexorable Doom ability continually stacking more, Jason's protective amulet was rapidly ticking over.

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Item: [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] (growth, silver rank, legendary)

- **Effect:** For each instance of an affliction applied to an enemy, gain an instance of [Guardian's Blessing]. You may bestow all instances of [Guardian's Blessing] upon another person by touch.
  - [Guardian's Blessing] (boon, holy): Instances are consumed to absorb damage from any source. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. For each instance consumed, gain an instance of [Blessing's Bounty].
  - [Blessing's Bounty] (heal-over-time, holy, stacking): Heal over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
- 

Each affliction became a shield and each shield became a regenerative effect, which was boosted in strength by the blood robes Colin allowed Jason to conjure. Added to the formidable resilience of a silver-ranker and the diminishing attack power of the heavily damaged vehicle, Jason was no longer in any danger, although a large number of Shade bodies had been chewed through. It would take a lot of time and mana to replenish them but for the moment, Jason had a fight to finish. From the back of his motorcycle, he cast a spell.

*“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”*

Punition dealt damage for every instance of every affliction on the target. Jason sank extra mana into the spell and the APC's structure started to sag like a bouncy castle with a hole in it.

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#### Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- **Spell.**
- **Cost:** Moderate mana.
- **Cooldown:** 30 seconds.
- **Current rank:** Silver 2 (17%).
- **Effect (iron):** Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.
- **Effect (bronze):** Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Penitence].
- 
- **Effect (silver):** Damage per affliction can be increased by increasing the mana cost to high, very high, or extreme. This reduces the cooldown to 20 seconds, 10 seconds or none. Consecutive, extreme-cost incantations have truncated incantations.
- [Penitence] (affliction, holy): Gain an instance of [Penance] for each curse, disease, poison or unholy effect that is cleansed from you. This is a holy effect.

- [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
- 

Maximising the mana cost also maximised the damage and negated the cooldown, turning the spell into a high-damage mana-sink. He cast the spell again straight away, with the truncated incantation, then once more, the spell burning through his mana supply.

*“Suffer.”*

*“Suffer.”*

With each spell, the APC deflated alongside Jason’s mana supply, but to his surprise and admiration, it was not yet destroyed. Unsure if it would even work, he cast another spell.

*“Feed me your sins.”*

Jason drained the accumulated afflictions from the APC, which apparently qualified as an enemy. He was unsure if it was because he’d been able to levy afflictions on it or because it was a special kind of conjured object. Either way, Jason was replenished by consuming the massive array of afflictions he drained from it, filling his mana and stamina well past full. They continued to rise, along with his health, as the enemy afflictions were converted into a stackable recovery buff.

The APC no longer looked like a stricken beast and more like the vehicle it was, albeit one that had been plunged into a lava pit. It was glowing bright with transcendent damage that cared nothing for active defence mechanisms and auto-repair systems as it chewed away at the metal. Jason cast the final spell.

*“Mine is the judgement and the judgement is death.”*

\*\*\*

The two men inside the APC were surrounded in transcendent light and the APC finally succumbed. They fell to the road as the moving vehicle around them vanished as the conjuration ended. That was not enough to injure someone of their rank and they quickly jumped to their feet.

Looking around, they saw a dark figure walking towards them, the motorcycle behind him dissolving into a dark cloud and being drawn into his shadow. Silver eyes watched them from a dark hood as he slowly approached. With the cloak wrapped around him and his smooth steps, it was almost like he was floating. The intimidating visage was broken as Jason pushed the hood back off his head, revealing a face bloodied from a bullet that had hit him in the head.

*“Hello, Andreas.”*

“Jason,” Andreas said warily. “I’m sorry about Kaito.”

“Not so sorry that you wouldn’t try and kill his brother.”

“You’re protecting someone who stole from us.”

“Reality cores aren’t yours to possess.”

“Only you get to have them?” Andreas countered.

“No one gets to have them,” Jason said. “You’re strip-mining reality. You think that won’t have consequences?”

“We’ve heard your claims,” Javier growled, still a hulking wolfman. “No one believes you’re going to save the world, Asano.”

“I know. I’m going to save it anyway. Go home, Andreas.”

“You’re letting me go?”

“Yeah. Do me a favour and remember that when someone is under your gun and you have a choice to make.”

Javier looked from Andreas to Jason.

“You aren’t just going to let this go?” he asked.

Andreas looked at the wolfman.

“He beat me at my best, and now I’m at my worst. You want to try him on, that’s your business.”

Javier turned to lunge at Jason but Jason’s aura came crashing down like a hammer. With just one target and nothing else to distract him, Jason could apply his aura at full force.

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#### Title: [Giant Slayer]

- Overcoming a much stronger enemy has left a permanent mark on you that can be sensed by others. This may trigger a fear reaction from the unintelligent and the weak-willed if your aura is significantly stronger than theirs. Your actual rank being lower than theirs does not diminish the effect.

---

The wolfman froze, trembling like a prey animal.

“Take him home, Andreas.”

Andreas looked at the stiff Javier and felt the fear drenching an aura hunkered down like a mouse under the gaze of an owl. He turned to look at Jason.

“Thank you.”

## Chapter 404

### When, Not If

Farrah dragged a vampire out of the lava by the foot. He was still alive, or at least undead, due to his silver-rank fortitude. His normal vampiric healing was not kicking in, though, due to the burn damage.

"Why are you letting him out?" Night Stalker asked. "You should finish him."

"We came to save you, not to kill the people you robbed," Farrah said.

"What if they come after us again?" Night Stalker asked.

"Then you can lament your mediocre life choices."

"Leave it, Bryan," Franklin said.

"Forget this; I'll do it myself."

Night Stalker moved to grab the crippled vampire, only to find himself looking down the length of Farrah's sword.

"This is all very tense," Jason said from behind the group, no one but Dawn having noticed his arrival. The car Farrah and Dawn arrived in had turned back into a group of Shade's bodies, one of which Jason had stepped out of.

"G'day, Craig," Jason said.

"Jason," Vermillion said with a greeting nod. "Thank you for the save."

Jason looked around at a section of street marred by magical battle. There were scorch marks everywhere, a takeaway shop had what was left of Vermillion's stolen car sticking out of it. The two essence users were battered but alive, both strapped down to the road by webs that had the gleam of metal. There were three vampires, all severely burned and far too hurt to keep fighting. Vermillion and his companions had torn and bloody clothes but their injuries had already recovered.

"This is Frank," Vermillion introduced. "And this is Night Stalker."

"Night Stalker?" Jason said. "Like the serial killer from the eighties?"

"It's doesn't sound like a serial killer name," Night Stalker insisted.

"Yeah," Jason agreed. "It doesn't sound like a serial killer name. It *is* a serial killer name. There was a guy in the eighties who raped and killed a bunch of people in California. If you're a vampire and you're going to run around calling yourself the Night Stalker I'm going to put you down now and call it a public service."

"It's fine, Jason. He's not running around killing people; he's just an idiot. How do you know so much about serial killers?"



"I went to school with this guy who collected serial killer trading cards. Greg and I used to..."

Jason trailed off, hanging his head.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Craig, why are you chasing reality cores?"

"We're forming an alliance, with members of the EOA and the Network. We have the numbers but the leadership factions of each have most of the strongest members. We need to get stronger, fast."

"Are you going to be fighting in the transformation zones over cores?"

"Yeah."

"Don't expect further help, then. Reality cores aren't for anyone to have. That goes for you as much as your enemies."

"Our enemies are your enemies, Jason. Will you let them run rampant?"

"You're squabbling over who gets to be captain of a sinking ship, Craig, and you're throwing people overboard to keep it afloat. Look at the state of the world. The army is fighting mythical creatures in the streets of Sydney. America is on the brink of civil war because the Network wasn't careful enough with their secret coup. Europe is being taken over by vampires and China is reaching new heights of civic oppression keeping a lid on everything. Governments are turning tyrant or threatening to collapse entirely. We're on the verge of anarchy."

"Our alliance wants to remedy that," Craig said. "Keep preventing the monster waves. Protect the people. But we need the strength. Look, if you can tell me how to help you save the world or whatever, I will. I don't think I'm what you need, though. So let us do what we can and you do what you can."

Jason turned away, running a dirty hand over his bloody face.

"Craig," he said his voice weary. "Going after reality cores is pulling down the roof to burn for warmth in winter."

"And not going after them is putting down your sword while your enemy is picking his up."

"It doesn't matter who wins if the world burns."

"But it does if you save it," Craig said. "That's what you're doing, right? Saving the world. We're trying to make sure it's still worth a damn when you do."

"He's not wrong," Farrah said.

"Whose side are you on?" Jason asked.

"Yours," she said. "Sometimes that means telling you to let something go and get on with the job."

Jason looked at her, his expression unhappy, but he didn't argue.

"People taking reality cores are bad," she told him. "But do you think that telling Craig not to do it matters in the long run? You're frustrated that it's happening. We all are. But this is not the place to make that stand because it gets you nothing."

"I likewise detest that the denizens of this world would ravage it for power," Dawn said. "You aren't going to convince them to stop, however. People will always ignore the greater dangers in pursuit of momentary concerns. Humans, elves, this world or another. It is true every time, in every reality."

"The only way to stop people from taking reality cores is to cut off the supply," Farrah said. "Which we should probably get back to."

"You can do that?" Craig asked.

Farrah winced.

"I shouldn't have said that."

Craig shared a look with Franklin and they flashed into motion, grabbing a startled Bryan, dragging him to the lava flow and shoving him in, head first. Jason, Farrah and Dawn shared a confused look.

"Craig?" Jason asked.

The two vampires held Bryan under until he stopped moving, which didn't take long for the bronze-rank vampire.

"What was that about?" Farrah asked.

"Bryan was a plant," Craig said. "The faction of the Cabal loyal to the old vampires inserted him to infiltrate the new alliance forming against them."

"You're sure?" Jason asked.

"Yeah. We didn't give him a heads up about hitting the reality core storage but brought him along so he would think he was in the inner circle. We were going to use him for misinformation but we can't let the old vampires know you can turn off the tap. They'll make you their number one priority."

"I'm sorry," Farrah said. "I should be more careful."

"I didn't sense any duplicity from his aura," Dawn said. "Bloodline dominance?"

"Yes," Craig said.

"Which is what, exactly?" Jason asked.

"The dominus vampire bloodline allows those higher in the bloodline to completely control those below it," Dawn said. "When a dominus vampire creates another vampire, they can control it, along with any more that vampire subsequently creates."

“Bryan was part of the dominus bloodline,” Vermillion confirmed. “We’re pretty sure that one of the old ones in South East Asia somewhere was controlling him.”

“Bloodline domination functions rather like a star seed,” Dawn explained. “Like a star seed, it is intensely difficult to detect outside of special circumstances.”

“I had a bond with Bryan, using my bloodline,” Vermillion said. “The bond was severed when the domination was put in place.”

“A star seed hides so well because it infiltrates the soul,” Jason said. “How does this bloodline get in?”

“Only lesser vampires are transformed in body alone,” Dawn said. “Greater vampires – bloodline vampires – are changed body and soul. It is why they cannot be forcibly turned, unlike lesser vampires. They have to accept the change.”

“We have to accept the gift,” Franklin corrected.

“Mate, I’d return that gift,” Jason said. “It makes you eat people.”

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After parting with Vermillion, Jason sent himself, Farrah and Dawn out to sea via portal and set up a cloud house. Distractions aside, they still had a node to repair and Jason needed to recover from the fight. A good number of Shade’s bodies had been wiped out by the APC’s weapon systems and it took most of Jason’s full mana supply to reconstitute one. He had managed to replace a few using the mana he had after the fight, far above his normal maximum but there was still work to do.

Jason went off to shower before he started meditating to replenish his mana as fast as possible. Midway through the shower, he swore out loud.

- 
- Cloud flask supply of [Crystal Wash] has been exhausted.
  - Supply additional [Crystal Wash] or an alternative cleansing agent to maintain cloud construct cleansing effect.
- 

He was surprised it had lasted as long as it had, the flask doing an effective job of diluting the huge quantity Jason had fed into it. That didn’t stop him from being aggravated when it finally ran out.

While Jason was showering, Farrah and Dawn went to the balcony to relax as they overlooked the Pacific. Farrah took the chance to ask some questions.

“I’ve been wondering about the vampires of this world. Do you know why they have so much more self-control than the vampires of mine? Is it the lower magic, somehow?”

"That is one of two factors," Dawn said. "Magically-charged sunlight has a negative effect on vampires. In the short-term, this means their strength is greatly reduced in sunlight. In the long-term, it has a degenerative effect on their minds."

"Does that mean as the magic of this world gets stronger, the vampires will start losing control?"

"Eventually some of them will, yes," Dawn said. "There is also the other factor to consider, however, which is strength of bloodline. The vampires of this world were spawned as echoes of other worlds. The oldest likely had the full strength of bloodline originators, so many of this world's vampires have much richer bloodlines than those of your world. It will shield them from sun degeneration."

"So, even the old vampires now being woken up can be reasoned with."

"Yes," Dawn said. "Although, I would not hold out great hope. Their personalities may not have been warped due to their vampirism but they will still be huge arseholes."

Farrah raised her eyebrows at Dawn's unexpected vulgarity and they both started laughing.

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Jason trudged through the cloud house, where he encountered Dawn.

"Oh," he said, looking up. "Dawn, you don't know how to make crystal wash, do you?"

"I'm not an alchemist."

"But you could get the formula, right? Or something that works the same from another universe or whatever."

"Not while I'm in this avatar."

"But if we killed you off, though, you could grab the formula from wherever and bring it back. Then we just have to find a decent local alchemist... why are you looking at me like that?"

Dawn walked away.

"Is that a no?" he called out after her.

He continued on his way, finding Farrah on the balcony, lounging as she looked out over the ocean. He fell backwards as a deck chair made of cloud rose from the floor to catch him.

"All done?" she asked.

"Every Shade, present and accounted for. How goes the proto-space hunt?"

Finding the right nodes to repair required carrying out rituals in proto-spaces. As they improved their understanding of the process through trial and error, they had a better grasp of which proto-spaces would help them and which ones would throw out false

positives. It allowed them to be more discerning in their activities, making the search for each individual proto-space take longer but ultimately saving them time.

"We had one hit but it was a gold-rank space. You were still down a bunch of Shades and I thought trying it at anything less than full strength was a bad idea."

"You didn't tell me."

"Bad ideas are kind of your thing."

Jason chuckled.

"I suppose they are."

He pulled a silver spirit coin from his inventory and slipped it into his mouth.

"I miss cooking," he complained. "I really want to make a hazelnut dacquoise."

"I miss home," Farrah said. "Did you realise that I've spent more time in your world than you have in mine?"

He sat up, looking over at her.

"No," he said. "No, I didn't. But yeah, especially if you don't count all that time I was in an astral space."

"I've found your world as wondrous as you did mine," Farrah said. "I'm ready to go back though. More than ready. I want to see hairy idiot Gary. Rufus is no doubt hopeless without me. I want to see my parents. My city. We were so eager to escape it and now I'm desperate to get back."

Jason's chair slid across the floor to arrive next to Farrah's and he gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

"You'll get there," he said. "It's when, not if."

"I know."

"You're going to have to play tour guide when we get there, you realise."

"Oh, gods, no. I don't even want to think about the trouble you'll cause."

They both knew that their arrival in Farrah's world would not be a light, fun time, but they were happy, for the moment, to pretend. That their arrival would herald the worst monster surge in the history of the world was something to think about later.

## Chapter 405

### Not Entirely Ethical

Jason emerged from the water, up the ramp at the base of the cloud house that led into the ocean. The swim had been pleasant and relaxing, although his silver-rank body was far too heavy to float. He didn't need to breathe, however, so he was as happy under the surface as on it.

Emi continued to splash about, under the supervision of her father, Ian, and discordantly youthful great grandmother, Yuri. It had taken some convincing before Erika had allowed her daughter to go swimming kilometres out into the Pacific, with Jason taking steps to assure Emi's safety. He had put away the more modest cloud house and brought out the cloud palace. He configured it into a huge curve, forming an artificial lagoon, complete with underwater rooms that formed an artificial seafloor and a net at the lagoon's aperture. It formed a calm haven from the ocean waves, as well as any sharks foolish enough to come to the cloud palace in search of prey.

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The cloud palace was a haven in more ways than one. In just the two weeks they had been working to identify their target reality node in Australia, the deterioration of world order had rapidly escalated. Australia itself was fine, in no small part due to an absence of the vampire lords making themselves known globally in even greater numbers than had been feared.

Several countries in Central America had already suffered total government breakdown, with several South American countries showing dangerous signs of following suit. America was a giant mess, already on the brink of mass civic conflict before vampires laid claim to Baltimore, Boston and Philadelphia.

Using the two gold-rank essence users in their ranks, the vampires in Philadelphia were resisted and killed but they lost many silver-rankers in the process of taking down eleven vampire lords.

China had been under a media blackout for months with the 'public protection measures' put in place months before letting almost no information out. The rest of Asia, as well as Africa, were both doing relatively well, with minimal vampiric activity, leaving the existing magical factions to continue fighting over reality cores. Russia and Europe were the exact opposite, suffering massive vampiric occupation.

Europe was the global hotbed for vampiric activity, with vampire lords laying claim to major cities all over the continent. Governments were working with the other magical

factions but Europe's Network branches had never been the powerhouses that China and the United States were. They would have trouble facing the vampires at the best of times, let alone in the midst of schism and factionalisation. Russia faced similar issues but oddly minimal resistance, with rumours of government collaboration with the vampires rapidly spreading.

The entire European Union had declared states of emergency but no effective response had been found. The vampire lords were forming councils in the various cities they laid claim to and were difficult to respond to. With small numbers of extremely powerful individuals, the vampires were too strong to face with the Network's elite forces but too few to face with overwhelming numbers.

Overwhelming force was a response tried in several cities, but while the vampires were killed or driven off, the price was unacceptable. The vampires, with their small numbers, used the population and infrastructure as shields, while Network forces were forced to rely on magically-enhanced ordnance designed to combat gold-rank threats. As a result, victory meant liberating a smouldering ruin, full of the dead.

Few nations were willing to pay that price after seeing the results and in many nations, the vampire lords were becoming de facto governments. Italy was the first nation to officially capitulate, in relatively bloodless fashion. France resisted hard but the razing of Paris and the vampires' bloody reprisals in other French cities effectively wiped out the resisting civilian authorities.

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In the wake of his final talks with Kaito, Greg and Asya, Jason felt lighter than he had since before the Broken Hill tragedy. He smiled, letting the sun dry him out as he watched Ian dive bomb Emi, joining her in the water. Jason would take all the good moments he could get. Farrah came up to stand next to him, but instead of swimwear, she had the robust clothing she preferred to wear under her conjured armour.

"Another one?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Hopefully I can pinpoint the node today."

Farrah gave Jason the location and he opened a portal. He couldn't travel to the destination directly but could get within a hundred kilometres. During his time sweeping proto-spaces with the Network Jason had travelled to a lot of Australia, and now his portal could range out to sixteen-hundred kilometres.

They appeared in a small town still marred by damage from the monster waves. Shade bodies emerged from Jason's shadow and melded together to take the form of a

helicopter. Other than being black, it looked exactly like Kaito's. Jason and Farrah boarded and headed for the proto-space.

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Some of the nations worst-hit by the current chaos had largely eliminated any Network presence, leading to a reappearance of monster waves. Australia was mercifully spared that, at least for the moment, despite the Chaos in Sydney and similar conflicts elsewhere. The leadership faction had moved to focus on reality cores, abandoning the old responsibilities to the larger but weaker faction, now going by the Global Defence Network.

One of the GDN teams entered a category three-dimensional incursion space, at which point the ritualist squad leader reported in to the expedition leader.

"Sir, we've done the checks and the readings are way off."

"How so?"

"The anchor monsters are already gone and the integrity of the space is too high. It won't break down until as much as twenty hours after it should."

"Then it looks like we've got an easy one."

"Sir?"

"He's here. Tell everyone to pack it up. With how thin we're spread, we can be more useful elsewhere than in a space that's already been handled."

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Jason got a fix on the node and managed a successful repair before returning to the cloud palace with Farrah. Afterwards, they sat on a terrace discussing their work with Dawn.

"As I spend more and more time working within node space," he said, "it feels like I'm getting a better grasp on astral magic. It's not like a skill book, imprinting knowledge, but more like being immersed in the primordial clay of reality is giving me a direct sense of all the theory I've been studying. Concepts that were abstract and hard to grasp make sense to me now."

"I believe the nature of your being also has an impact," Dawn postulated. "Normal physical beings have a perception of conventional reality that is a hindrance to understanding the higher concepts within astral magic theory," Dawn said. "It takes an extraordinary mind or highly unusual circumstances to overcome that. Your being, like node space itself, is a gestalt of the physical and the spiritual, rather than two halves like Farrah, myself or this universe. Even someone with astral affinity will have trouble enduring it, yet you have no discomfort, do you?"



"No," Jason said. "There's an effect my abilities identify as dimensional discorporation, which sounds delightful. As you said, my unusual nature renders me impervious to it."

"It could be said that node space is more the place you are native to than normal reality," Dawn said.

"I'm not sure I like that," Jason said. "I mean, it's fine to visit but I don't think I'd stay."

"The question is whether this improvement to your understanding of astral magic is improving your ability to identify and repair nodes," Farrah said.

"I think it is," Jason said. "It feels like it is but I guess we'll see as we keep going."

"I ask," Farrah said, "because I'm worried about what happens when the ambient magic crosses the threshold where magic starts manifesting directly. No more proto-spaces will make identifying nodes harder."

"I don't know how that will go," Dawn said. "What Jason is doing amounts to pioneering a new sub-specialty of astral magic. Or, perhaps more accurately, he's exploring a field that has always been taboo. This kind of interference with the physical/astral boundary is exactly what the World-Phoenix, and I as its representative, have always sought to sanction."

"But you have to cut open that patient to perform surgery," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn said. "If we haven't sufficiently repaired this end of the link between worlds before the magic here changes, we will find a new methodology. What it will cost us is time."

"I guess I should pack up the cloud palace," Jason said. "With how things are going in Europe, maybe we should have gone there before Australia."

"I don't regret it," Farrah said. "We cleared Australia's only vampire lord, which puts it in a good place. With how many vampires are coming out of the woodwork, it may be that Australia becomes a fallback position for humanity's magical forces. They're fractured and scattered now but the vampire lords are just too powerful. The magical factions will need to stop fighting and come together."

"Assuming the Americans don't just nuke Venice," Jason said.

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Five spears made of red crystal slammed into Jason, throwing him back and pinning him to the wall. One went through his gut, one through his chest and one each in an arm and a leg, immobilising them. One went for Jason's throat but he managed to dodge enough that it ripped a chunk from the side of his neck instead of piercing through the middle.

“You made a terrible mistake,” the vampire said as it walked slowly toward him.

“I know,” Jason said painfully through gritted teeth. “I should have changed before going out. This outfit is ruined. Which is ironic, given that you’re the one in need of a wardrobe update. I’m sorry, mate, but if you think those lace cuffs are working for you, I’ve got some bad news.”

“You are a fool.”

“I’m a lot of things,” Jason said. “Focusing on that one seems rude when there are so many options. I’m quite peckish, for example, which you’d know if you were polite enough to ask. I don’t suppose you’ve got a sandwich on you? Probably not a sandwich guy, right?”

“I am going to turn you.”

“Could you turn me into a construction guy? You’re damaging a museum, here. You know they have Carracci’s *The Choice of Hercules* here? I love that painting, although his choice should definitely be to put on some pants. I know the Mediterranean is a pleasant climate but it would be nice to see one picture of Herc where he wasn’t tackle-out. That’s rough sunburn to get.”

“I’m going to hurt you before I turn you,” the vampire said as blood flowed from his hand, took the form of a sword and crystallised into a razor-sharp blade.

“I don’t suppose you’re talking about hurting my feelings?” Jason asked optimistically. The vampire raised its sword to strike when webbing wrapped around it and yanked it backwards, sticking it to a wall opposite where Jason was pinned. The vampire immediately started yanking itself free, even as a fire bolt struck the webbing, setting it and the vampire ablaze.

The moment the vampire was pulled away, Jason cast a spell.

*“Your blood is not yours to keep but mine on which to feast.”*

The red crystal spears in his body turned back into blood and were absorbed into his body, healing the wounds that they, themselves had made and freeing Jason. As the spell took effect, dark mist shrouded him, swapping out his bloody clothes as his blood robes and starlight cloak were conjured around him.

“You took your time,” Jason said as the mist vanished. Threads already on fire snaked in through a large hole in the wall, wrapped around the vampire as it pulled itself free and yanked it once more, this time right out of the building.

“He hit me through a wall with a sculpture of a naked guy hanging out with a naked little boy and some grapes,” Farrah said. “It was more worrying than the vampire.”

“I wasn’t sure I could stall the guy out until you stepped in. If I’d tried to cast my spell with him right in front of me, he’d have stopped me before I could finish the chant. I couldn’t even shadow jump with those things in me. I think they stop teleportation.”

“How did you stall him out?”

“Talked a bunch of crap.”

“Then I’m sure you were fine. You played to your strengths.”

Dawn came hurtling in through the hole, clearly not voluntarily as she went tumbling over the museum’s display floor.

“Perhaps a little help?” she suggested, calm in spite of her dishevelled state as she lightly hopped to her feet.

Jason extended a shadow arm and smashed the ceiling light. There were more lights in the large hall and darkness didn’t impede a vampire, but that wasn’t his goal. The dim light and sculpture exhibits turned the area into a playground of shadows into which Jason melted as the vampire stalked back in through the huge hole in the wall where Dawn had pulled him out.

This vampire was stronger than the one they fought in Australia, turning its own blood into versatile weapons. With Jason added in, though, it was not as hard as the one Dawn and Farrah had faced without him. Dawn used control effects while Farrah staggered the vampire with blitz attacks. The final piece of the puzzle was Jason, taking the chances Farrah and Dawn provided to lock in his afflictions. The Farrah and Dawn kept it off balance until the afflictions overcame it.

When the vampire went down, they were barely able to keep it alive. Fortunately, Jason’s transcendent afflictions dropped off over time, allowing the gold-rank fortitude of the vampire to leave it barely clinging to life.

“I guess you drain it,” Farrah said.

“Actually,” Dawn said, “I would like to try something. Bring him and we’ll go; he’s not the only vampire lord in Naples.”

“What do you want to try?” Jason asked as he grabbed the vampire’s scorched legs.

“Something not entirely ethical,” Dawn said.

## Chapter 406

### Ahead of Schedule

"You want me to use this guy as a battery," Jason said.

The cloud house had taken the appearance of an unremarkable and isolated farmhouse in the Italian countryside. The gold-rank vampire they had captured was locked in a cell from which they were confident it wouldn't escape. By silver rank, the cloud house was starting to show its diamond-rank potential as it grew more powerful and sophisticated. A single gold-ranker wasn't powerful enough to force their way in or out.

"Yes," Dawn said as they observed the vampire through a one-way window.

"You weren't wrong about it being ethically questionable."

"Vampires feed on people," Farrah said. "Seems fair that you do the same to them."

"And is that how we judge ourselves?" Jason asked. "By the standards of bloodthirsty monsters?"

"No," Dawn said. "We judge ourselves by our actions. Not just the momentary ones but the larger scope of what we do. With what we are trying to achieve and the obstacles in our way, draining one bloodthirsty predator to get any advantage is a morally acceptable act."

"And how far can we go?" Jason asked. "How many bad people is it okay to lock up and torture?"

"All of them," Farrah said.

"What about good people?" Jason asked. "How many can we sacrifice? Where's the line? What's the number?"

"There isn't a number," Dawn said. "Thinking there is some kind of objective value in all this that can be quantified is a fool's argument. Like all acts of morality, it's a matter of exercising judgement."

"Yeah, well..."

Jason's shoulders sagged.

"...I'm not so sure I trust my judgement."

"Then it is good that you are not alone," Dawn said. "Miss Hurin was not sent to this world on a whim. She was sent so that you would have someone to rely on."

"You're saying I'm the sidekick?" Farrah pouted.

Jason looked at her thoughtfully, smiling as she grinned at him.

"Alright," he said. "Thank you. I'm still not comfortable just draining this guy over and over, though. Also, I don't think he's got a lot left in him."

The vampire was not in good condition. Between Jason's transcendent damage and the fire powers of Farrah and Dawn, even a high rank essence user would have trouble surviving in his current state.

"We need to get some of the reality-core treated blood they drink," Dawn said. "He can work as a filter for you to top off, drain and then top off again."

"You talk about getting at their blood supply like it's a simple thing," Farrah said. "There was a reason we didn't raid the reality core storage in America."

"It's not the same circumstances, though," Jason mused. "The vampires don't have the ritual magic to emplace defences and mundane security measures won't stop us."

"Don't be so certain about the magical defences," Dawn said. "The Cabal may have recruited useful Network defectors."

"Yeah," Jason acknowledged, remembering the silver-rank essence users they fought in Australia. "If they can get top tactical personnel on board, recruiting some ritualists is certainly possible."

"Especially given how badly the Network is struggling in Europe," Farrah said.

The vampire lords had repeated the attack on the Sydney branch all over Europe, with far greater success. Sydney suffered massive damage from one vampire, while in European cities two, three, even six vampires had attacked network branches to eliminate their primary rivals. The Network was holding on in backup locations and tertiary branches, continuing to shut down proto-spaces, but their efforts were growing desperate.

"I believe that the circumstances are different enough that the potential rewards outweigh the risks. Only the vampire lords themselves would be powerful enough to stop us and you've seen their pridefulness for yourselves. They will not be as diligent as they should. At least until someone gives them a reason to."

"A gold-rank vampire is only going to play guard if a stronger vampire forces them to," Jason reasoned.

"And they won't be happy about it, so they probably won't be too diligent," Farrah said. "Still, it's a big risk."

"We still have Jason's trump card, if something goes wrong," Dawn said.

Jason had a magic item in his possession that he obtained a long time ago, during the Reaper trials. It was a diamond-rank consumable item containing the power of sunlight, which Dawn confirmed would be highly effective, even against vampire lords.

"That's something I want to keep in my pocket in case we find ourselves in a bad situation," Jason said. "We only get to use it once."

"If we're going to use it actively," Farrah said, "we should do it right."

"What are you suggesting?" Jason asked.

"What if we track down the biggest storehouse of reality cores and vampire blood in Europe to hit. Except, we leak that we're going to hit it, so the vampires are waiting for us. But instead of trying to sneak in, we come in force. Carefully recruit some Network people and hit them hard. Use the item and wipe out as many of the bloodsuckers as we can."

"In theory, that's good," Jason said. "There's a good chance that if we're recruiting, they'll catch wind of it, though."

"Then we let them," Farrah said. "The vampires are prideful and won't back down. They'll bring even more of their number to utterly crush any opposition and prove their dominance. The more we can hit with the item, the more we can wipe out."

"No," Dawn said. "That is getting too big. We're not here to kill vampires. Taking the chance to grow stronger when it costs us minimal time is one thing but taking the time to organise a large scale attack is too much of a distraction from our goal."

"You're right," Jason said. "I like the idea of making a dent in the vampire population but that would be spending time we don't have to buy risk we don't need. I'm willing to spend days on this while we're waiting for the right proto-space to pop. That kind of operation would take weeks of active effort, though. In the end, cutting off the reality core supply faster will ultimately save more lives than killing some vampires now."

"Fine," Farrah said. "I'm keeping this plan in mind, though. If we see a good chance to try it, I want to revisit this conversation. Dawn, it feels like every time we're about to stage a great reality core heist, you throw cold water on it."

"Boldness is a requisite of achieving our objectives," Dawn said, "but to be bold is to walk on a foolhardy edge. We must be vigilant that we do not slip off that edge."

"We still require a supply of treated blood," Jason said. "We have to get it somewhere."

"We conduct a smaller operation than Miss Hurin suggests. Something quicker and safer. Rather than hit one of the core vampire territories, we choose a peripheral target and raid the blood treatment centre there."

"Will there even be one in a less important location?" Jason asked. "Won't they just distribute the blood from a central, secure site?"

"Even the weakest vampire lord is an edifice of power and pride. None of them would allow anyone else to hold them hostage with the blood supply," Dawn said. "Every vampire lord requires a regular supply of treated blood, otherwise the low levels of magic will rapidly diminish their power until they return to a state of torpor. Given the enemies they are making of everyone, they cannot afford moments of weakness due to breaks in the

supply chain. Reality cores they likely ship around, but none of the vampires will let themselves get too far from their blood supply.”

“That’s a weakness that hopefully gets taken advantage of when the time comes to deal with them,” Jason said. “Unfortunately, the world has too much happening all at once.”

“So we pick a city that’s big enough to have vampire lords, but small enough that the stronger vampires are elsewhere,” Farrah said. “That rules out going back to Naples, right?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “It’s too big and they’ll be on alert after this guy disappeared.”

They all looked in on the vampire, lying still in a miserable state.

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Jason had used the cloud flask to produce its vehicle form. Previous it had taken the form of a large tour bus, while now it was a medium-sized yacht, moored amongst other pleasure craft at a dock in Venice. The only reason anyone was using the boats now was to escape the city. The tourist boats around them were all empty, which their aura senses easily confirmed.

“I’m still not sure Venice was the best bet,” Farrah said as they sat in the boat making plans. “Isn’t this the very first city the vampires took over?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “That’s why it’s the most damaged city. The Italian government hadn’t thrown in the towel yet and supported the Network standing up to the gold-rankers. Those original vampire lords were also some of the strongest, though. They left a crumbling city for larger population centres.”

“Vampires view population as a commodity, like herds of cattle,” Dawn said.

Jason and Shade had already done some initial scouting of the city. He had likewise been sceptical of Dawn’s suggested destination but what he learned eavesdropping on lower-rank vampires validated her choice. Venice was a soft target that no one thought of as one because it was known that the strongest vampires had emerged from it.

“The original vampire lords here have moved on to larger cities, leaving the weaker ones to manage it,” Jason said. “If you can call any of the gold-rank vampires weak. There are only two of them here.”

“Which makes it a good target,” Dawn said. “Venice is a symbolic territory for the old vampires, not a valuable one. This is especially true now that the fighting has caused so much destruction. There is no glory in ruling over ruins.”

While Dawn and Farrah remained hidden on the boat, monitoring the grid for proto-spaces, Jason went back out to investigate the city. Shade and his many bodies were an incredible boon on that front, with one body left behind so that Dawn and Farrah could speak to him through it and he could quickly shadow jump back to the boat.

Roaming the city, he found that the streets and canals were largely empty. He sensed the people unfortunate enough not to have evacuated during the fighting huddled in their homes, only venturing out for food. The vampires allowed some remnants of civic authority to remain operating, organising food distribution stations, even importing food from other Cabal-controlled territories.

Almost everyone out on the streets was a Cabal member, and most of those were vampires. There was no shortage of lower-rank vampires ready to cast off the veneer of civility and indulge their thirst for blood. Jason spotted more than one group breaking into a home and sending the occupants running before hunting and consuming them for sport.

Jason itched to step in but unless he had some plan to liberate the city, all that would do is bring more trouble down on the residents. Even if he made just a few lower-rank vampires disappear without a trace, the gold-rankers would be unwilling to tolerate challenges to their authority and investigate thoroughly. The first one to suffer would be the closest innocent people the vampires could find.

Jason and Shade trailed the low-ranking vampires around the city, gaining a better understanding of the city's state of affairs. It was like territory captured by an enemy army, with only the occupying forces out in numbers on the mostly empty streets. Many bridges and buildings had suffered catastrophic damage, with some canals flooding after being dammed by rubble. The vampires were pulling people out of their homes and forming work gangs to clear them out.

The canals themselves were otherwise empty of activity. The famously filthy water was even running clear in the areas not stained by building debris. There were swans and Jason even spotted fish swimming about. It was an oddly bright point in a city that had otherwise become a dystopian nightmare. He hated that after years of wanting to visit Venice, this was the state in which he found it.

Jason and Shade were also able to glean more information about the vampire lords themselves. The lords also needed more sleep than their less powerful brethren, despite the enhanced blood running through them. Vampire lords slept as much as twelve to fourteen hours, mostly during daylight.



Continuing to observe the lower-rank vampires, Jason learned of a growing rift between the vampires and the rest of the Cabal. The vampires were a minority within the organisation as a whole but waking up the vampire lords had turned them into a ruling minority. There was growing dissatisfaction amongst the cabal's many other factions, who were being edged out of positions of authority. There was also, from what he was hearing, a sizeable portion of the vampire faction that, like Craig Vermillion, did not support the old vampires.

Jason was scouting out the blood treatment centre set up in a medical clinic when Farrah called him back. He shadow-jumped back to the boat, arriving in the room where Farrah monitored the grid. It looked like the communications station of a spaceship, with screens and control panels everywhere. Farrah and Dawn were both watching different readings on the various monitors.

"You found a target proto-space?" Jason asked.

"No," Farrah said. "It's something else."

"Oh?"

"A transformation event had happened in a space that was already coterminous to a proto-space," Dawn said.

"Will they interact?" Jason asked.

"From the readings that the grid is throwing out, yes," Farrah said.

"What kind of effect is it having?"

"That is way beyond my understanding of astral magic," Farrah said. She and Jason both looked at Dawn.

"I believe," Dawn said, "that this world has decided to end ahead of schedule."

## Chapter 407

### Open Wound

As they walked through an army base in Germany, a handful of male Network troops threw up fists as they spotted the huge and hairy figure of Jack Gerling. The Germans had been avid about expelling the American Network forces from their country until the rise of the vampire lords changed everything. The powerful US forces had been critical in helping Germany deal with powerful vampires across multiple cities, leaving it as one of the least ravaged nations on the continent. In return, Germany was now the US Network's key staging point in Europe.

"Beer and titties!" they called out.

"Beer and titties!" he responded with a grin, pumping his own fist into the air.

His power and importance made him a recognisable figure on the base and he had gone out of his way to make friends with all the tactical teams. It cost him little to sow seeds that could potentially have him reaping a critical harvest in the future. He walked through the base, greeting various people as he went until he reached his personal quarters. The moment he stepped inside, the friendly expression on his face went blank.

He was being more careful with his boorish façade, having let it slip too much in the wake of the fight with Asano. The leadership was still very tight with the reality cores and the last thing he wanted was to be seen as too capable to control.

The American Network's leadership had made a priority of advancing more people to category four, especially with the rise of the ancient vampires. It wasn't the disaster in the US that it was in Europe but it was bad enough and only getting worse. The Network had been keeping a collection of people just short of category four and already reality cores had allowed two of them to cross the threshold.

This was in addition to the other category four who, like Gerling, had been woken up from stasis. Gerling was still the only one of the category fours the US Network had in Europe as the others were assigned to handle domestic problems. For the moment, Gerling was too valuable to be expendable.

Already, though, he had seen signs of the leadership becoming nervous about the category fours and the danger of them seizing power. Until he could be certain of a regular reality core supply, Gerling would keep leaning into his more self-indulgent urges, playing the hedonist thug.

His quarters on the base reflected this, being filled with personal luxuries he had obnoxiously demanded. His handler, Cleary, was more than happy to meet them, satisfied

with the minor concessions he gained for providing them. Cleary, especially, had seen behind Gerling's mask and was looking to alleviate his suspicions. By being consistent with his self-indulgence, he would slowly but surely lead Cleary to dismiss any doubts.

Battling Asano and Hurin had been a startling wake-up call for Gerling and although he maintained an outward display of hedonistic excess for his nominal masters, he quietly dedicated himself to growing stronger. The US had always had the best training programs, alongside China, and what Farrah Hurin had introduced to the Network had been used to refine them.

Gerling had gone through the same training as everyone else but had always coasted on the explosive potential of his abilities. Those powers were the reason he had been chosen as one of the first to raise to category four. It was only after the magical deficit forced him to let himself be placed in stasis that he realised that he had also been chosen for expendability if something went wrong.

Now, Gerling had a team of trainers helping him drive his abilities to new heights, refreshing the skills that had been drilled into him years ago and allowed to fall fallow. He kept his training quiet and his recreation loud, making sure to complain about the effort.

Inside his quarters, his personal assistant was waiting for him. He had two of them but only cared about one. Fiona was smart and ambitious. Gerling was confident that she knew that she would go further with genuine loyalty than reporting on him to Cleary. She did make those reports, but they contained exactly what Gerling wanted them to.

As for his other assistant, Gerling constantly amused himself by assigning the young man a series of lengthy and elaborate demands. To his surprise, his assistant's dedication and enthusiasm led to his unexpectedly fulfilling Gerling's often bizarre and indulgent requests.

Fiona handed Gerling a memory stick.

"This is everything I could get on Asano's encounter with the EOA in Venezuela," she said. "Several essence users were using that small town as a retreat so there are quite a few testimonials there from people with magical and aura senses. There is also a lot of footage shot from phones."

Gerling took the memory stick, tapping it against his other hand absently, lost in thought. He had watched the news footage of Asano, killing the EOA's enhanced humans more than a dozen times. It was Asano's aura that concerned Gerling the most. Being a skilled essence user with excellent command of his abilities was something Gerling could accept. The raw power of his aura, however, overturned Gerling's understanding of what

was and wasn't possible. What else was Asano capable of? Could Gerling obtain that power for himself?

"Anything new on here?" he asked, holding up the stick.

"Not any major details," Fiona said. "Additional confirmation that Asano killed them using his aura alone, based on what the witnesses were able to sense."

Gerling moved to a desk and plugged the memory stick into his laptop.

"Thank you, Fiona."

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"What do you mean by the world ending early?" Jason asked. He, Dawn and Farrah were still in the cloud boat, discussing the overlap between a proto-space and a transformation event.

"These transformation events are well outside of my experience," Dawn said. "This event is still ongoing, so no one can enter the zone to confirm anything until it completes its transformation and opens up again. That being said, I have seen all manner of dimensional events and sufficiently unstable dimensional forces all have similar results."

"And?" Farrah prompted.

"Based on the readings we've been taking from the grid, I believe that something very dangerous is happening."

"Dangerous like a super monster wave?" Farrah asked.

"Far worse, I'm afraid," Dawn said. "Dimensional ulceration."

"Oh, that's bad," Jason said with a wince.

"Can someone explain that to the person not specialised in astral magic?" Farrah asked.

"Imagine an open wound in the side of the universe," Jason said. "That's very, very not good in a universe whose dimensional membrane is stable and healthy. In a fixer-upper universe like ours... I don't even want to contemplate."

"In the best case," Dawn said, "it will establish a second source of magic that will start feeding into this world."

"Like the dimensional link we're going to all this effort to fix," Farrah said.

"Precisely," Dawn confirmed. "Except that this source will be impossible to cut off. Normally the World-Phoenix and her agents would work to remedy such a situation but Earth's dimensional membrane is like a thin sheet of glass, already full of cracks. Trying to repair it could shatter it entirely."

"That's the best case?" Farrah asked.

"The worst case," Dawn said, "is that the dimensional membrane rapidly collapses and this world is annihilated. That subsequently tears a chunk out of this entire reality, chaining into the universe completely breaking down. It's more likely the damage will be contained to your planet, or at least your solar system, but it may end this entire physical reality."

"So, worse than a super monster wave," Farrah said.

"Considerably," Dawn agreed.

"I'm assuming you have a plan," Jason said. "I'd really like to hear a plan."

"It may be possible for you to stabilise the effects," Dawn said. "During a transformation event, the entire area is sealed. I believe this is because the area is drawn at least partially into what you, Jason, have been referring to as node space. The dimensional changes taking place are being affected by the proto-space coterminous to that area, causing what is already a reality-shearing transformation to go out of control."

"You think I can use the Builder's door to enter the sealed space," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn said. "The World Phoenix personally sculpted a racial gift evolution that would make you the perfect living tool for resolving problems in dimensionally unstable space. Your presence alone will be a help."

"Hold on," Jason said. "You want me to go into a place that can't be entered and brave conditions that are completely unknown in an environment being torn apart and rebuilt at a level that makes subatomic particles seem shallow?"

"I know it seems too dangerous to—"

"Awesome," Jason said.

"Pardon?" Dawn asked.

"No piles of victims turned zombies. No saving who I can while the dead pile up around me. Just going some crazy pocket dimension for some good, clean world-saving? Get it right and everybody lives?"

Jason nodded his head, grinning.

"I think I've needed this for a long time," he said.

"You will have to go alone," Dawn said. "No one else can reliably survive the conditions within an active transformation event, except for the people who are part of it and they don't remember anything. They are, at the very least, unconscious. More likely, they exist in some kind of transitional state and you should avoid them as best you can. For your sake, as much as theirs. I was trying to tell you that it will be dangerous."

"You were also telling me that I would have to do it anyway right?"

"Yes. It needs to be done and only you can do it."

“You know that the transformation event will be crawling with people gearing up to snatch the reality core, right?” Farrah asked. “This will reveal Jason’s door power to everyone. They won’t understand everything about it, but the ability to enter transformation events is all they’ll need. They’ll start coming after him because they’ll think he can give them a head start on core collecting.”

“If only they knew,” Jason said. “Reality cores are pebbles on the ground in node space.”

“Unfortunately, there will be no getting past them unnoticed,” Dawn said. “There will be considerable attention on the transformation space. You will need to enter swiftly, in case anyone attempts to intercept you before you do.”

“Which is why I need to go alone,” Jason said. “You can’t come in with me and you can’t hang about with all the others outside.”

“Leave your family as well,” Dawn said. “If the worst happens and you fail, I will make sure they and Miss Hurin are sent to the other world.”

“You can do that?” Jason asked.

“If this world’s dimensional membrane enters a state of irreversible collapse, I no longer have to worry about damaging it. I can intervene directly and take them away in my dimensional vessel.”

Jason gave her a warm smile.

“Thank you.”

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Each transformation event had a tense prelude where the different magical factions arrived and everyone waited for the impassable barrier to drop so the search and fight for the reality core could begin. Fighting breaking out beforehand was more common than not. The rise of the old vampires had only added to the already strong position of the Cabal in these conflicts, as all their members grew stronger in transformation spaces.

There were places where Network held the edge, however. In Europe, Jack Gerling was the single most powerful individual. The old vampires outnumbered him, but his abilities were specialised in devastating large numbers of enemies, levelling the playing field. Rumours spoke to similar circumstances in China, although very little information got out. No one was even sure exactly how many gold-rank essence users they had, although no one doubted they had at least some.

The transformation zone that appeared on the plains of western Slovakia was special because of the proto-space it formed on top of. This drew unusually large forces from every faction, all of whom could now tap into the grid. The EOA gained access when they

took over Network duties at the request of several governments. The Cabal gained access more recently though Network defectors.

None of the magical factions had the understanding of astral magic that Dawn or even Jason possessed. They could tell that the transformation space was unusual but most were postulating that the result would be additional reality cores, not an inexorable doomsday clock.

The transformation zone was currently a glimmering dome several kilometres across. A giant rainbow under glass, it swirled with bright, wild colours. In the nearby city of Nitra, Jack Gerling was sitting at an outdoor café, rather than hovering around the dome. Even if the event was unusual, it was unlikely to open up for days, like always. The estimations were that it would take more time than normal, not less.

Nitra was something of a blessed city, being too small to host any ancient vampires but large enough to warrant Network protection during the monster waves. It was now a major centre for the Network after being pushed out of Bratislava by vampires. As a result, it had weathered the magical tribulations of the past several years in far better stead than most, allowing the residents to maintain at least some aspects of their normal lives.

As he sipped at his coffee, Gerling's gold-rank perception allowed his eyes to pick out something moving through the air, despite its great altitude. It struck him as odd as normally planes stayed away from transformation zones, and this one was jet black. After months of investigating Jason Asano's behaviour, he knew what a black vehicle going somewhere it shouldn't meant.

"He's here."

## Chapter 408

### Looting a House Burning Down Around You

In the Slovakian city of Nitra, Gerling stepped out into the street and launched himself into the air with gold-rank strength, sailing high over the rooftops. As he reached the top of his arc, he triggered an explosion that sent him rocketing through the sky. More explosions continued to send him hurtling in the direction of the giant dome out on the plains.

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Shade's plane form dissolved into a cloud of shadows from which Jason dropped out. The cloud trailed him like the tail of a dark comet as he descended, being absorbed as he plunged through the air. Jason allowed himself to freefall, angling his body towards the huge target of the dome.

The auras gathered around the transformation zone told the story of the magical factions waiting to exploit it. The contentious Network factions were split into various camps. There were the American Network and the old leadership faction, still calling themselves simply the Network. Jason couldn't differentiate one from another just by the aura of essence users, while the other factions were more obvious.

The breakaway Global Defence Network was not just comprised of essence users but also former EOA and Cabal members. Unhappy with the direction their factions had taken since magic was revealed to the world, they banded together and were the most numerous of the current magical factions. Their weakness was that for all their numbers, they had a limited number of powerful elites.

Jason would be more sympathetic to their cause if they weren't here to plunder reality's treasures like everyone else. He understood their need for strength to compete with the other factions, but his time in node space gave Jason a better sense than even Dawn of what stripping the Earth's reality cores was doing. He couldn't bring himself to accept people tearing the fabric of reality apart for their own ends.

Also present were the Cabal, split into vampire and non-vampire camps. It reinforced what Jason had learned in Venice about the Cabal's internal tensions. The last faction present was the EOA, who had long been the poor cousins in the fight over reality cores. That was slowly changing, though, as more of the magical drug that boosted them temporarily to gold rank was disseminated. This allowed them, at least briefly, to match up with the power of vampire lords.

The EOA had largely abandoned the League of Heroes and the hero gimmick to operate more openly. It was a difficult position to maintain when other forces were



demonstrably stronger than what were ostensibly superheroes. Now they were operating more like superhuman paramilitary, although their flight and eyebeam powers still maintained a very superheroic flavour.

There were several gold rank auras present in the vampire camp, but the most powerful aura present was approaching at blistering speed from the direction of the nearby city. There were explosions of magic in the distance, one after another, which Jason sensed before the sound of them reached him. They were propelling the gold-rank aura was rocketing toward the dome at supersonic speed.

“He’s here,” Jason murmured, his words whipped away in the speed of his descent. He angled his body down for maximum acceleration, trying to reach the dome before the gold-ranker that killed Kaito, Asya and Greg arrived. He aimed for the very peak of the dome, to avoid the factions gathered around it. He used his cloak to decelerate at the last moment but still landed hard on the glassy surface of the dome. Underneath, energy swirled like a rainbow lava lamp.

Without hesitating, Jason opened the magic door, although its appearance was different from the norm. Ordinarily, Jason’s portal abilities, be it the spirit vault, the node space door or a normal portal, took the form of an arch of dark, smoky glass with glimmers of transcendent light within. The node door he called up this time was set directly into the surface of the dome, the familiar glassy stone forming a ring. It was an aperture into the dome, exposing the rainbow energy otherwise trapped beneath the dome’s surface. The exposed energy churned like a boiling cauldron.

Gerling arrived next to the portal without slowing down, the impact releasing a massive gong-like sound, along with a shockwave that whipped at Jason’s blood-coloured robes. Each standing on opposite sides of the portal, they stared each other down.

“I talked to my girlfriend after you killed her,” Jason said. “She told me that I shouldn’t go looking for revenge.”

“You don’t have the strength for revenge.”

“No today,” Jason said as Shade’s bodies emerged to stand around him. “But you don’t have a fancy teleport trap in place, either. I don’t think you can catch me. Neither do you.”

“How did you get away the first time?” Gerling asked. “It was something to do with your aura, right? Negating the suppression collar? Is it an essence ability that lets you do that? An outworlder power?”

“I’m not here to answer your questions. I have more important things to deal with.”

“What are you doing here? Finally joining the fight for reality cores?”

"Think what you want," Jason said. "I've warned you all and no one cares."

Gerling stared at Jason, his face conflicted.

"I've been investigating you since we fought. You really are different from the essence users of this world."

"What does that matter to you? You're here for reality cores like the rest. You're all too obsessed with power to realise you're looting a house burning down around you."

Gerling looked down at the portal set into the dome.

"Are you really trying to save the world?"

"Yes."

"From what?"

Jason thumped a foot on the dome.

"I don't know if you've noticed," he said, "but our planet is coming apart at the seams. I've been trying to stop it from slowly disintegrating but now there's this thing and I have to stop it from quickly disintegrating."

"Everyone thinks there will be more reality cores than normal when this dome opens."

"Maybe there will be, I don't know," Jason said. "But if I don't go in there and fix this today, it won't matter what's in here."

Gerling turned his gaze from the portal back to Jason. They could both sense more auras rapidly ascending the dome in their direction.

"Go," Gerling said. "Do what you have to do."

"Seriously?"

"I have questions, but I'll catch you another day."

"Leaving me to do this doesn't absolve you for killing my people."

"I don't want your absolution," Gerling said. "I want your secrets."

Jason would have fired back another retort but the auras were drawing close and he didn't have time. Letting Gerling have the last word, he stepped over the portal and dropped inside, like falling through a manhole. Gerling was left alone with the portal.

"He talked to her after I killed her?" he wondered out loud.

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The atmosphere was tense and people from all the various factions stood around the portal. Everyone was looking at everyone else as they eyed-off the new entrance to the sealed transformation zone.

"Gerling, what happened?" asked a silver-ranker from the American Network.

"Someone opened a door," Gerling said. "Any of you want to go in, I'm not going to stop you."

“You’re the most powerful person here,” the silver-ranker said. “You can beat everyone to whatever is inside.”

“I’m not sure I want whatever’s inside,” Gerling said.

“You let fear guide you,” a vampire lord sneered.

Gerling turned his gaze and his aura on the vampire, who met his eyes for a moment before flinching. Whatever else might be happening, Gerling was still the most powerful being out of everyone gathered atop the dome.

“If anyone is willing to play lab rat, go right ahead,” Gerling told the assemblage. “Tell me how it goes.”

He leapt back into the air and shot off with a series of explosions.

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Jason dropped through the portal, set into the ceiling of a small, windowless room. It had faded, floral-print wallpaper that was torn and peeling, revealing aged and cracked plaster underneath. A closed wooden door was the only visible exit.

Jason’s head swam, his vision unable to penetrate the shadows in the corners of the room. The only light was the multihued glow of the portal over his head. His conjured cloak and robes were gone, leaving him in his underwear with his boots and magical amulet.

- 
- You have entered an extremely abnormal space.
  - This space operates according to an abnormal magical paradigm. Essence abilities will not take effect.
- 

His aura and perception power were both gone. They were so much a part of him, an extension of himself that to suddenly lose them felt crippling. His basic senses were still enhanced by his silver-rank attributes

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- Both magical and physical aspects of this space are in a state of severe flux.
  - Your ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has a stabilising effect on the immediate space around you. You may exert the influence of your soul to permanently stabilise areas of the affected space.
  - Utilising your soul to express influence over this space brings a chance of permanent alteration to your physical and/or magical properties.
- 

“Oh, what the bloody hell is this?”

The method he used to cause changes within node space involved leveraging his aura as a tool, something Jason had become increasingly adept at. Now he could no longer do so due to the loss of his aura power, despite that being the entire point of coming into the transformation zone.

The hope had been that stabilising the transformation zone would be much the same as rectifying a node, which was tricky but more or less safe, and something he had done before. Instead, he now had to figure out how to somehow imprint stability on the space by exposing his soul to unpredictable changes. If there was anything less than the whole world at stake, he'd be inclined to flee immediately.

He was currently in a small, enclosed space. His options of what to do first were experimenting with exerting control over the space with his soul and opening the door to take stock of his surroundings. Both approaches had merit, with the explore option potentially giving him a better understanding of what he was dealing with. Figuring out some kind of control, on the other hand, might give him a critical tool should he run into some kind of threat.

He decided to stay put for the moment and take stock. He could still feel the presence of his familiars in his soul, but they were unable to manifest their vessels due to the negation of his essence powers. He hoped the vessels were simply suppressed and not destroyed. He lacked the resources to resummon his familiars and no longer had the contacts to source more of them.

A quick test revealed that Jason's essence abilities might be gone but his outworlder powers remained intact. He was unsure if this was normal for racial gifts or the result of the Nirvanic Transfiguration power the World-Phoenix designed for him. Either way, it let him pull a fresh set of clothes from his inventory.

"At least I don't have to save the world in my underpants. It'd be a good story, though. Maybe I should... no, that wouldn't be sensible."

Jason also took out his sword, Dread Salvation. It had been roughly three years since Gary made him the sword but it felt like a lifetime ago. Dread salvation had been designed to help Jason in his moments of greatest need, a gesture of gratitude for helping Gary in his time of need. It did so by helping Jason fight enemies his powers were unable to hurt. Since reaching silver-rank, Jason hadn't pulled it out. Not only did Jason have the power to bypass such immunities, now, but the growth weapon was limited by Gary's skill at the time he crafted it, only able to grow to bronze-rank strength.

Jason's reliance on his conjured weapon, currently denied to him, meant that his under-ranked sword was the only backup that he had. Even so, the familiar grip in his

hand was a reassuring presence when he was alone in what was sure to be a bizarre realm.

Further testing his powers, he pulled up his map ability. The racial evolution of his map power, which gave him access to a tactical mini-map, was not something he used very often. It allowed his aura and magic senses to map the location of anyone or anything they sensed, but Jason largely relied on his aura senses directly. It was most useful in tight, complex confines, such as stalking the vampires in the Network office in Sydney.

The results of bringing up the map were a little disconcerting. Only the room he was in was marked on it. There was a fog covering the space outside the room, and the edges of the map were shifting and changing as he looked at them. He checked the listed location.

- 
- **Zone: Genesis seed (reimplemented).**
  - **Warning: this location does not fully exist.**
- 

It was the first time Jason had seen a special note like that for a location, especially one as disconcerting as 'does not fully exist.' Even remaining in a proto-space until it completely collapsed didn't give him such a warning.

Continuing to test his available abilities, his power to turn Shade's bodies into vehicles was a nonstarter as Shade was unable to emerge in the first place. His last active power was his spirit vault, which he was unsure about trying. His spirit vault was the doorway to his soul, which he was wary about opening. The system message had warned him that exerting his soul in this place could permanently change him in unknown ways.

Opening up his soul in this strange space was potentially dangerous, although it also could be the key to using his soul to stabilise the space, given that he was currently unable to wield his aura. After some consideration, Jason decided that with the circumstances, the restrictions on him and the stakes, he had to take some risks.

He tried opening the spirit vault but the familiar archway didn't appear. Instead, the dilapidated room around him started to change. The walls slowly started transmuting into the familiar smoky glass, faintly radiating light, that his portal arches and the pavilion in his spirit vault were made of. As it changed, Jason felt his aura awaken, slowly giving him control over it once more.

## Chapter 409

### Domain

Jason was in a small room that was transforming from a dilapidated plaster box with peeling wallpaper to a stone room shaped by his own power. He had tried to open his spirit vault but instead, the space around him seemed to be turning into his spirit vault. It was more than a little disconcerting, although the benefits were obvious. One was that he may have stumbled onto the means by which he could stabilise the transformation zone before it gouged a wound in the skin of the universe.

The other benefit was that Jason could once again express control over his aura. It lacked the specific powers that came from his aura essence ability but he was able to project the power of his soul outwards once more. It only extended as far as the transforming walls, which suggested that Jason could somehow claim dominion over the space by transforming it.

The only part of the room not transforming was the wooden door. Jason was contemplating opening it when it exploded inward as some manner of monstrosity burst in, slamming Jason against the opposite wall. It happened too fast for him to get a sense of what he was fighting, other than it being big, fleshy and warm as it pressed him between its mass and the wall.

He couldn't reach the sword at his hip so he employed wrestling techniques to wedge his arms between himself and his attacker, earning himself some literal wiggle room. This allowed him to slip out of the creature's press and take what little space he could in the enclosed room.

The creature was comical in proportion: a blob of muscly flesh on a pair of ordinary human legs that looked far too frail to support it. It had no arms, no face, just a pink, fleshy mass. Jason wasn't even sure how it squeezed through the normal-sized door. As it awkwardly turned its legs in his direction, he drew his sword, which seemed to enrage the creature. The front of it opened like a mouth, the skin and flesh pulling apart with a wet ripping sound. Square, uneven, fist-sized teeth pushed their way through the meat at the top and bottom of the wound-mouth. It let out a scream of rage and pain that chilled Jason's blood.

Jason backed up hard against the wall as it rushed him again, lifting both feet to intercept the creature, pushing back against it to maintain a gap as it pushed him harder into the wall. It snapped its mouth as Jason fended it off with his legs, his sword held

overhead in both hands. He started stabbing down but the blade slid off its rubbery skin, leaving not so much as a scratch.

The creature managed to get its mouth around one of Jason's boots, twisting to fling him around. He barely held on to his sword with one hand as the creature shook him like a dog with a toy. Using his silver-rank flexibility and strength, Jason flexed at the waist to extend his empty hand into the creature's mouth, grabbing one of the big square teeth. He used the leverage thus gained to plunge the sword into the creature's mouth, burying it deep into the flesh within. Yanking the blade savagely back and forth, he ignored the crushing force of the mouth on his arm and foot until the creature dropped dead. It's lifeless body landing heavily atop Jason.

- 
- You have defeated [Living Anomaly].
  - Would you like to loot [Living Anomaly]?
  
  - Interaction with [Living Anomaly] has instigated random changes in weapon [Dread Salvation]. Further interaction will consolidate change.
  - Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised and refined changes to weapon [Dread Salvation].
  - [Dread Salvation] transformation status: 0.4%.
  
  - You have established a spirit domain. Expanding your spirit domain will define and stabilise unstable genesis space but trigger anomalous reactions from genesis space outside the spirit domain.
  
  - Interaction with genesis space has instigated uncontrolled secondary evolution of ability [Spirit Vault]. Further interaction will complete evolution.
  - Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised and refined the secondary evolution path of [Spirit Vault].
  - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 0.003%.

---

The first thing Jason did was loot the monster sprawled on top of him, which dissolved into the thickest rainbow smoke Jason had ever encountered. Unlike normal rainbow smoke, which was incorporeal and passed through any solid object before dissolving into the astral, this smoke was heavy, oily and seeped into the smoky glass bricks of the room. It also had, by some dark miracle, an even more repellent stench than regular rainbow smoke, which already smelled like hair being burned inside the carcass of a dead whale. Even with Jason not needing to breath, it was like the rancid stink was permeating his skin.

- 
- [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 0.004%.
  
  - [Stable Genesis Core] has been added to your inventory.

- 10 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 

Jason lay on the floor, feeling his injuries rapidly heal. The fact that Colin's regeneration was still in effect probably meant that the vessels of his familiar were intact and simply unavailable, which was good. He was unable to pull out Gordon's orbs, which meant that only the passive bonuses of his familiars were being passed along while the active ones remained sealed away with his essence abilities.

After pushing himself up to a sitting position and shuffling back to lean against the wall, Jason took a closer look at the system messages. Using his sword on the creature had triggered a nascent transformation in the weapon, with his Nirvanic Transfiguration ability directing that change in a positive direction. The same was true for using his spirit vault power to stabilise the transformation space.

He reminded himself to have Dawn thank the World-Phoenix for the power. He knew that it wasn't generosity but the need for a tool that could repair the damage to Earth. Since he would have tried to do it either way, though, he was grateful for the ability. More and more he realised that it shaped him into exactly the right tool for the job. Without it, he would have failed long ago.

"Greg called me a tool more than once," he said to the empty room with a sad smile. "I guess I can't begrudge some super god from taking it literally."

Jason's independent streak was strong but, for the moment at least, he and the World-Phoenix had the same objectives. He might not trust the great astral beings, with their alien minds and epoch-spanning agendas but he was forced to acknowledge that they had done a lot for him. Whatever their motivations, the World-Phoenix brought him both home and back from the dead, while the Reaper brought back Farrah. If the price for all that was saving a world or two, he was happy to pay it.

Jason looked up to where the rainbow smoke from the living anomaly seemed to be absorbed by the space he had stabilised. There were a lot of unanswered questions about the living anomaly. Firstly, how did Jason's power know it was called a living anomaly? Did his mind arbitrarily assign it or did Jason have some kind of extremely powerful divination power he was unable to actively employ? There was also the question of the anomaly's rank.

Jason's aura senses had been restored alongside his aura, albeit in a similarly restricted fashion. It was definitely enough to recognise that the anomaly had been silver rank, though. Was that a coincidence? It seemed odd that a reality-reshaping event would



be limited to silver-rank power. Was it a factor of earth's low magical density or was it related to Jason himself? He searched through the system messages again.

---

- You have established a spirit domain. Expanding your spirit domain will define and stabilise unstable genesis space but trigger anomalous reactions from genesis space outside the spirit domain.
- 

Did the anomaly appear as a reaction to Jason using his spirit vault power? It made sense to Jason that if the anomaly was triggered by his action, the resulting reaction would share his power level. It seemed likely that more of those things would appear as he attempted to stabilise the space, so hopefully, they wouldn't be much more powerful.

It had been very weak compared to most silver-rank monsters, falling into the variety that normally appeared in large packs and was severely lacking in fortitude. Even so, the bronze-rank sword had trouble piercing the creature's skin, forcing Jason to attack its more vulnerable insides. The anomalies that appeared in the future were likely to be far more numerous as he expanded the stable area and more of them spawned.

Jason looked to the door that had been shattered to splinters by the monster's entry. It was dark outside and without his perception power, the gloom obstructed his vision. The last thing he did before going out was taking the item he looted from the monster from his inventory to examine.

---

Item: [Stable Genesis Core] (unranked, common)

*A refined vessel of transformative potential energy (consumable, magic core).*

- Effect: Use to set up spiritual domains. Expanding spiritual domains requires additional cores based on the size of the spiritual domain.
  - You are in the vicinity of your spirit domain. Cost to expand: 1 [Stable Genesis Core]. Would you like to expand your spirit domain?
- 

Jason declined for the moment but was satisfied to have what looked like a viable method to achieve his goal. He had come in with no solid idea of what to do but now there was a path ahead of him. As best he could determine, he would need to expand his spiritual domain using his spirit vault power, and then harvest the anomalies that attacked so he could expand it more.

Either he would need to completely convert the transformation space or maybe just reach some kind of threshold that stabilised it enough that a wound wasn't torn in the side

of reality. He just hoped that he could handle however many anomalies came at him while he didn't have his combat powers.

Putting away the core, he got to his feet and resheathed his sword, the blood and gore on it having dissolved into smoke. He made his way to the door to find what awaited him. He emerged into what looked like a hotel hallway, in the same state of disrepair as the room he just left had been. The transformation brought about by his spirit vault had stopped inside the room.

There was more peeling wallpaper and thin carpet with patches where the underlay or the floorboards underneath could be seen. There were fluorescent ceiling lights in the hall, most of which were dark. Only a few sporadically flickered, shedding intermittent light. If he had his shadow powers it would have been a welcome environment. Instead, he felt what he suspected others did when they knew he was out there, somewhere in the dark.

Rather than immediately try and expand his spirit domain, he decided to explore a little. After leaving the room he was no longer able to project his aura, so he was left relying on his mundane senses. He had two directions to go, right or left, and chose left at random. He tried some of the doors he passed but they were all locked. He didn't try breaking in.

As Jason moved further down the hall, he slowed and then stopped as a wrongness nagged at his senses. It was frustrating to be impaired by the dark for the first time in years and he was unsure what exactly had tripped his instincts. Looking around in the flickering light, he fixed on the walls, something about them not seeming quite right. He drew his sword and ran the tip gently along the wall, which scraped away the surface as if the walls were a façade; a wet, thickly layered painting of a wall rather than the wall itself.

He tried pushing his sword in deeper and it dug in with little resistance, but the reaction was immediate. The wall around his sword flinched like a living thing, drawing back and threatening to pull the sword from his hands. Pulling the sword free of the wall, he examined the blade to find it coated in a clay-like substance, mixed with what looked and smelled like blood. The wall returned to its original position, once more looking like a wall except for a hole leaking more blood.

Jason took some cautious steps forward and the patchy carpet started squelching underfoot, having become the same paint-like substance as the wall. He backed off, back onto actual carpet. Checking that he'd been passing through an actual hallway, he identified the point that ostensibly normal hallway gave way to a strange paint-flesh thing. Heading down the other way, he confirmed that in either direction, the hallway started

turning strange at points equidistant from his spirit domain, the room in which he had arrived.

Nothing else had attacked Jason during his exploration of the hallway, leading him to postulate that nothing would until he either expanded the spirit domain or delved further into the strange space beyond it. He stood outside the room he had arrived in, which was currently the extent of his spirit domain. Once more he took the stable genesis core from his inventory.

- 
- You are in the vicinity of your spirit domain. Cost to expand: 1 [Stable Genesis Core]. Would you like to expand your spirit domain?
- 

“Sure,” he said. Immediately the doorway started transforming from dilapidated wood into dark, smoky crystal. The effect spread along the walls, floor and ceiling, extending down the hall. The dead or flickering ceiling lights were replaced with glowing crystals that spread cool light down the hall. From the dim reaches beyond, Jason heard the sounds of movement.

## Chapter 410

### Needs of the Moment

His silver-rank attributes placed Jason firmly in the realm of superhuman, but attributes alone were only potential. If not used to their maximum potential they were being wasted, which was what differentiated the best adventurers from the worst. This was something Rufus, Gary and Farrah had repeated over and over during his training. From the very start, they had been looking not just further ahead than Jason but even beyond their own progress at the time. Jason was now stronger and more experienced than they had been at the time.

At iron-rank and even bronze, only specialists like Sophie engaged in wild acrobatics. At silver-rank, though, any essence user not moving like Spider-Man was squandering their potential. The might of the power attribute, fuelled by the recovery attribute, controlled by the speed attribute and guided by the spirit attribute. Just as essences formed a confluence, so did attributes combine into a greater whole.

With his essence abilities sealed away, it was the skill and discipline hammered into him by Rufus, Gary and Farrah that carried him through. Armed with an under-ranked sword marginally better than his bare hands, his only means to confront the living anomalies was pure fighting.

When Jason had used the first stable genesis core, his spirit domain had expanded outwards. The smoky glass with the glimmering internal light spread out from the room it had already taken over and both directions down the hallway. It stopped at the point where the normal hallway gave way to the bizarre materials Jason had already discovered.

- 
- Your spirit domain has expanded.
  - Interaction with genesis space has instigated uncontrolled secondary evolution of ability [Spirit Vault]. Further interaction will complete evolution.
  - Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised and refined the secondary evolution path of [Spirit Vault].
  - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 0.008%.
- 

Two anomaly creatures emerged, one from each end of the darkened hallway. Both were wildly different from the anomaly Jason already killed and each other, in both appearance and abilities. One scuttled across the ceiling like an insect, looking like an emaciated human with too many elbows and knees. It was fast but Jason knocked it off the wall before stomping and stabbing it to death in fairly short order.

---

➤ You have defeated [Living Anomaly].

---

It was frailer than any silver-rank entity he had encountered but its inherent silver-rank damage reduction shielded it from much of the sword's damage. Jason's ability to ignore rank disparity only extended to his own body and his currently-sealed powers.

The second anomaly was much harder to handle. It had human proportions but was featureless and androgynous. As he watched, it took on a more feminine body shape and launched itself at Jason with technique that he recognised. It moved the way he remembered Sophie moving and fought the way he remembered her fighting.

Fake Sophie's bronze-rank techniques were no match for Jason's silver-rank prowess as he defended himself from its attacks and quickly slashed the creature twice with his swords. Jason didn't doubt that Sophie was, like him, far stronger than when they had last seen each other.

Over time, Jason's fighting style had grown more offensive as he learned to incorporate more attacks without compromising his ability to evade or disappear into shadows. Although he would never come out swinging a club, there was more aggression in his techniques. Since Broken Hill and Makassar especially, the transition was not just a matter of technique but mentality.

Now that he was fighting without powers, he moved away from the finesse of his normal style to a more brutal approach. One of the benefits of having learned from skill books was having a broad suite of techniques to mix up his style. His fighting style, The Way of the Reaper, had a very mixed martial arts sensibility of versatility and adaptation.

Although Jason's speed and perception often made his fighting style seem like film choreography, that was when he had all his tools and powers at his command. Even pushing his silver-rank speed and strength to the limits, the living anomalies were silver-rank too. They might have been even weaker than equivalent-rank monsters but Jason was fighting them outnumbered, with what amounted to a sharp stick.

The second anomaly changed again, this time taking the shape of Rufus. Rufus's sword skill, even at bronze, was a match for Jason's. Still, Jason was able to leverage his superior attributes and slowly overwhelm the Rufus clone until it shifted again.

This time it was Farrah, bone splitting out through the creature skin to imitate her conjured armour. This fight swiftly proved futile for Jason. Unlike the Sophie and Rufus shapes, which reflected the bronze-rank powers Jason remembered, Jason remembered Farrah at her current strength. He was also unable to penetrate the armour with his sword.

Suspecting that the anomaly was turning his own memories into weapons, Jason decided to try something unconventional. Gaining distance, he cleared his mind. After years of magical meditation, he could quickly and easily focus his mind on a singular thing, which is exactly what he did. Jason's entire mind was consumed by a single image of the least dangerous thing he could imagine.

The anomaly stopped dead still as its shape shifted from that of Farrah to that of Thadwick Mercer. Jason had never actually seen Thadwick fight, but as he had hoped, Jason's disdain for Thadwick and his capabilities translated into the stolen shape. It even seemed to affect the creature's resilience as Jason's blade easily slid into its throat and it dropped dead.

Jason consumed the two cores he gained from those two anomalies to further expand his spirit domain, which spread far enough to claim each end of the hallway. Three anomalies appeared, all from the same direction this time and he became increasingly pressured as he fought them. After putting them all down, he took stock and explored the ends of the hallways.

The smoky crystal had overtaken the corridor, pushing back the strange gooey material the hall was otherwise made from. As he checked the new boundaries of his spirit domain, he found that one end of the hall ended in a stairwell going up and down. He quickly determined that he was on the fourth floor of a five-storey building.

A normal transformation zone maintained a close relation to the shape it had been in before being transformed. The pastoral plains this zone had covered had nothing remotely like a five-story hotel, dilapidated or not. Jason guessed that the transformation zone had been influenced by the proto-space it overlapped with.

With no idea of how long he had to accomplish his task, Jason was concerned. He was confident he could control how much he expanded his spirit domain and how many anomalies accordingly attacked by how many cores he used at once. With no idea of how long he had to stabilise the transformation zone, he felt the need to accelerate his pace but wasn't confident about taking on more than a few of the anomalies. Even if they were much weaker than equivalent-rank monsters, Jason was much weaker than an equivalent-rank essence user at that moment.

Checking the other end of the hallway, Jason found it looping around to other areas on the same floor. Not wanting to waste time, he decided to keep expanding the spirit domain at his current pace, facing two or three anomalies at a time. He hoped that something would change if he met some threshold of spirit domain size, giving him an exploitable advantage.

He could use his aura within the domain already, albeit without the effects of his aura power. If the domain grew large enough, perhaps even his powers could be restored. Then he could tear through the anomalies like the devil riding a bloody wind.

By the time he had claimed the entire fourth floor, he was not happy with his progress.

- 
- [Dread Salvation] transformation status: 32.6%.
  - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 0.098%.
- 

He strongly suspected the evolution of his spirit vault was directly tied to his progress stabilising the zone. The minuscule percentage suggested he would need to accelerate. His only hope was his sword, which he hoped would open a new path. He moved up a floor and slogged his way through more anomalies to claim it for his spirit domain.

- 
- [Dread Salvation] transformation status: 68.2%.
- 

Another floor would likely do it but Jason wanted to stop for a break. Even without using powers and his silver-rank recovery attribute, Jason felt exhausted. With the top floor claimed, he wanted to survey his surroundings from the roof. His aura could extend to any point within his domain and he could feel the roof above with it so he knew the rooftop was now within his domain.

Making his way up the stairs and outside there was no sign of the dome that should have been blocking the daylight sky. Instead, the sky was dark and open, filled with unfamiliar stars forming unnerving, eldritch constellations. They reminded Jason vaguely of magical diagrams and he imagined any rituals based on them would be dark and twisted magic. Which probably meant he would end up with it, somehow.

The stars offered just enough light to make out vast silhouettes moving in the distance, monolithic and alien. Jason couldn't see well enough to make out what any of the shapes were but they towered like skyscrapers. They could just as easily be giant robots, kaiju or Lovecraftian horrors, their distant shapes so vague in the darkness.

"As long as they're not from Evangelion," he muttered to himself. "That show is way more messed up than Lovecraft."

Looking out at the vast space around him he probed the edges of the domain with his restored aura. With his experience working within node space he was able to get a sense of what was going on. The transformation space had inadvertently sliced open the astral

space and blended the reshaping of the physical reality with that of the astral space. Now they were entwined and neither was able to close.

His better understanding of the transformation zone brought good news and bad. The most critical thing was something of a clock on Jason stabilising the space. The astral space and the transformation zone spaces that had been blended together were slowly but sure destabilising. Eventually, both would collapse. The good news was that Jason could sense enough to know that it would take much longer than the two days a normal transformation remained sealed for. Even so, he knew that he would need to pick up the pace by a lot. Even if he had more time than expected, the expansion of the area due to the astral space's influence meant he had a lot of work to do.

Jason looked down at the sword on his hip. One more floor and it should complete whatever change it was undergoing. Although it was a growth item, the sword was stuck at bronze-rank until Gary reforged it. Ideally, the transformation would throw off the shackles of that limitation and allow it to rise to silver rank, thus becoming a more viable weapon. At the moment it was barely better than Jason's fists and feet.

If the sword became stronger, Jason could start using more stable genesis cores at a time. He already had a collection of the cores, having declined to escalate the expansion rate of the spirit domain with them. All that was left was to complete the sword transformation and see, so after a rest on the rooftop, he headed for the unclaimed third floor.

Worried about the amount of work ahead, Jason used enough cores to send five anomalies his way. He realised his mistake immediately as each anomaly was strange and unpredictable making each combat a new experience. He only killed the last one after it half swallowed him, leaving him severely injured. A fleshy ball, it had a giant, toothy mouth that shot out tendrils to grab him and drag him in to be consumed. His legs were chewed up and partially dissolved in digestive acid before he killed the creature and dragged himself out.

Jason lay on the floor of the newly extended portion of his spirit domain. Normally, after a fight, he would simply use his blood harvest power for massive recovery. It was a power he rather took for granted until it was gone. Having suffered enough damage than even Colin's regenerative power was taking time to heal him up.

Jason pulled out a tin of healing ointment and started rubbing it on his legs. It was one of the most common items any loot power produced, and while it was of little use to Jason and his many recovery powers, it was a reliable source of cash if he needed some quick coin. Healing items were always welcome and Jason accrued so many that he



donated most of them. In the other world he had handed them off to Jory's clinic, while in this one it was usually the Network or the Asano village's medical centre.

Rubbing the unguent on his wounds, bereft of powers, took Jason back to his arrival in Pallimustus. He recalled the shock and confusion he experienced, convinced he had gone insane as one impossibility after another piled up. Once more he found himself in a place he struggled to understand, fighting to stay alive and find some kind of path forward. He was even mostly pantsless again, his trousers having been all but destroyed by the creature chewing on his legs.

Recognising that massive downtime would not accelerate the end result, Jason went back to a slow and steady pace of slow expansion, fighting three or four anomalies at a time. Finally, as he had most of the third floor claimed, he got the result he'd been waiting for.

- 
- You have defeated [Living Anomaly].
  - Interaction with [Living Anomaly] has instigated random changes in weapon [Dread Salvation]. Further interaction will consolidate change.
  - Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised and refined changes to weapon [Dread Salvation].
  - [Dread Salvation] transformation status: 100%.
- 

“Moment of truth.”

---

- Dread Salvation has undergone changes deeply affected by the powers of its wielder.
- 

Jason looked at the simple message.

“Huh.”

He held out his sword to examine it.

---

Item: [Dread Salvation] (bronze rank [growth], legendary)

*A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope of it being the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was bound to its wielder and his powers by extreme and unusual forces; it carries the arrogance of one who would remake reality in his own image. Due to the lacking craftsmanship, most of its potential is sealed until the original craftsman demonstrates his growth by reforging the weapon (weapon, sword).*

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else. This bond allows the weapon to share the wielder's ability to ignore rank disparity.

- Effect: You may imbue your aura into the weapon, increasing its damage for an ongoing mana cost. Damage and cost scales with the amount of aura strength imbued, up to the limitations of the weapon's current state. Aura strength over that required for the maximum damage output reduces the mana cost.
  - Current rank: Bronze.
  - Current maximum damage increase: Moderate.
  - Current maximum mana cost: Low. Decreased from moderate by wielder's aura strength. Mana cost cannot be eliminated entirely, regardless of the wielder's aura strength.
  - Effect: ??? (Sealed).
  - Growth conditions (silver): Sealed.
  - [Dread Salvation] has reached the maximum potential of its current form. It must be reforged by the original craftsman in order to advance further.
- 

Jason read over the changes to his weapon. It had lost its old abilities but that was not a concern, given their limited value to him. He suspected that the sword bonding to him somehow recognised that and changed accordingly, changing into a state that met the extreme needs of the moment. Even in its current sealed state, the weapon was far more useful.

---

- You have three soul-bonded items. You qualify to use the [Soul-Imprinting Triune].
- 

It was an item he had looted from the intelligent gold-rank monster, King. It was something he had been unable to use, thus languished in his inventory. Now that had changed and he pulled the item out to examine it.

## Chapter 411

### A Beautiful Woman and a Sack of Cash

Jason needed to claim most, if not all of the vast extradimensional space he found himself in. If he failed, a wound would appear in the side of reality leading to the Earth's rapid annihilation. He could bring about the transformation by expanding what his powers described as a spirit domain, something he only moderately understood. Thus far, he had managed to convert the top three floors of a dilapidated hotel, turning it into a cold place of dark crystal.

His progress was far too slow but he had a new weapon - or an old one, reborn. The sword that Gary had forged in the hope of it helping Jason when his need was greatest. Now that it was newly-empowered, Jason believed it would live up to Gary's intentions. Before he set out to use it, though, there was more power to potentially invest in it.

Standing by the stairs leading down to the second floor, Jason took an item from his inventory. The soul-imprinting triune had obvious religious connotations from the name but took the form of a plain pyramidal object, the size of a melon. Running his fingers over the smooth surface, Jason couldn't tell if the dark material it was made from was stone or metal, but it was quite heavy for its size. Jason had previously not met the qualifications for its use and had even vaguely considering scribbling numbers of it with a white marker and using it as a novelty four-sided die.

---

Item: [Soul-Imprinting Triune] (unranked, legendary)

*An object with the power to allow imprinting of the soul on three soul-bonded objects. (consumable, magic core).*

- **Effect:** Select three growth items that are soul-bound to you. These items will become a unified set. When all three objects are on your person (not contained within a dimensional space), each will gain an additional effect. The specific effects are determined by the types of objects included in the set and the nature of your soul.
- **Current soul-bound items:** [Amulet of the Dark Guardian], [Cloud Flask], [Dread Salvation].
- **You meet the qualifications to use this item.**

---

The soul-imprinting triune would allow Jason to turn his soul-bound items into a set. It was an exciting opportunity but there was also one noticeable problem. One of the items, which were required to be carried directly on his person, was the cloud flask. There was no

problem with his amulet or sword, but the cloud flask was the size and shape of a round-bottom boiling flask. It was not exactly the most convenient item to be carrying around in a fight. He needed to weight up the pros and cons of using the triune now.

“Pro,” he mused out loud. “If I include the cloud flask, the extra effect might be a flying cloud, like Monkey Magic. I mean, yeah, I’m not short on flying powers. I have Shade and I can fly with my cloak, but still. Definite pro.”

There was no one to tell Jason off for having inappropriate ideas but he couldn’t help but feel the shadows of Shade and Farrah looking at him with disapproval.

“Con, I’ll have to lug the cloud flask around if I want to use the extra abilities.”

Another pro to using the item was that it offered him power now. With his abilities sealed and the world itself at stake, he needed every advantage he could get. The attendant con was that there were no guarantees the effects would be any good. If he held off until he found a better-suited item, the dividends of patience could be great. Of course, he had no idea when or if he would get another soul-bound item, or if it would be any more convenient to carry around than the cloud flask.

As he considered, Jason wandered back up the stairs to the rooftop. Looking out at the dark realm around him, it was largely hidden from his eyes by a pervasive gloom that seemed tangible. The starlight struggling to penetrate it barely let him make out vast silhouettes in the distance that could be diamond-rank monsters for all he knew. It was entirely likely that even at full strength his efforts to stabilise the vast area would be futile. In the face of that, there was little point in holding off on taking power he could get now for some potential power that may never come.

The cloud flask was empty, the contents still in the form of a boat docked in Venice. Farrah, Dawn and his family were awaiting his return there. Jason couldn’t even be certain that the triune could be used on the cloud flask without its contents, although, with the decision made, he was about to find out.

Looking around at the flat rooftop of dark crystal, this was the substance that Jason’s portals and the structures within his soul were made of. Originally it had been simple obsidian, but that changed after he absorbed the Builder’s magical door.

Jason held out his hand and concentrated, employing methods he used to manipulate reality in node space. He stood for a long time, pressing out with his aura as he tried to understand the nature of the otherworldly dimension he inhabited.

The space was abnormally blended the physical and the spiritual, much like Jason himself. The immediate area was also part of the spiritual domain he had claimed, so he should be able to control it. He used his aura like a microscope, trying to grasp the

fundamental underpinnings of the mutable reality of the transformation zone. He closed his eyes, his physical senses being useless in the endeavour.

Slowly, he was able to make out some of the properties of the space around him, his experiences with node space and studies in astral magic being pivotal. It was far from a complete understanding but it was enough that he could get around some of the basic underpinnings of how the reality worked. Compared to a full-blown physical reality, the transformation zone, still in flux, was much easier to comprehend.

Using the same mental commands that let him control his cloud house, combined with the reality-bending techniques he used in node space, he tried to make an active change. It took some time before he got it quite right, but finally, the crystal surface of the roof flowed like liquid, rising to take the shape of a table before once more setting firmly.

- 
- Your understanding of your spiritual domain had improved. Evolution of ability [Spirit Vault] had advanced due to your insight.
  - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 1.784%.
- 

Jason took out his cloud flask and set it on the table. The sword came off his belt and the amulet from around his neck, both of which he laid out as well. He held the triune in his hands.

- 
- You meet the qualifications to use [Soul-Imprinting Triune].
  - Use [Soul-Imprinting Triune] on [Amulet of the Dark Guardian], [Cloud Flask] and [Dread Salvation]?
- 

Jason gave his mental assent and the triune started dissolving into a mist that spread over Jason and the objects on the table. They floated into the air and started drifting around Jason's body. Jason felt his soul reaching out to the objects, striving to deepen the shallow connection it already had to them. As it did, he could feel each of the three objects. The mist started condensing into lines, connecting Jason to his magical items.

The amulet had the strongest affinity to him already. The last item produced by his old quest system before that ability evolved, the power had left him with a potent final gift.

- 
- [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has been added to set [Regalia of the Dark Hegemon].

Item: [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] (silver rank [growth], legendary)

*A protective amulet with the power of a shadowy guardian. Has the power to express the will of the hegemon (jewellery, necklace).*

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else.
- Effect: For each instance of an affliction applied to an enemy, gain an instance of [Guardian's Blessing]. You may bestow all instances of [Guardian's Blessing] upon another person by touch.
- Effect (set bonus, Regalia of the Hegemon): For each instance of an affliction applied to an enemy, gain an instance of [Hegemon's Will].
- [Guardian's Blessing] (boon, holy, stacking): Instances are consumed to absorb damage from any source. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. For each instance consumed, gain an instance of [Blessing's Bounty].
- [Blessing's Bounty] (heal-over-time, holy, stacking): Heal over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
- [Hegemon's Will] (boon, holy, unholy, stacking): All allies within your aura have increased resistance to aura suppression. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consume instances of this boon to enhance your aura suppression strength.

---

The amulet was a reproduction of Jason's personal crest on a delicate obsidian chain. As Jason's soul imprinted on it, the chain transmuted into the same dark crystal that made up the spirit domain around him.

The cloud flask was the work of some unknown diamond-rank craftsman and felt more distant and nebulous than the amulet. Jason had been using it for a couple of years now and they had grown stronger together, but the flask still felt like it still had secrets locked away until they grew stronger still.

- 
- [Cloud Flask] has been added to set [Regalia of the Dark Hegemon].

Item: [Cloud Flask] (silver rank [growth], legendary)

*A vessel containing the power to generate sophisticated cloud constructs. Has the power to serve as a tool of the hegemon (vessel, tool).*

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else.
- Effect: Use the energies within the cloud flask to create buildings and vehicles made of clouds. Available forms are restricted by rank.
- Effect: Items contained within the cloud construct when it is returned to the flask are stored in a dimensional space and cannot be recovered until another cloud construct is formed.

- Effect (set bonus, Regalia of the Hegemon): Shrouds the wearer in mist. Mist can be controlled through aura manipulation to condense into small cloud constructs. Constructs only provide effective defence against attacks lower than the rank of this item; attacks of its rank and above are minimally impeded. Shroud can be withdrawn into the flask.
  
  - Available forms (iron rank): Cloud house (grand), cloud house (adaptive).
  - Available forms (bronze rank): Cloud vehicle (grand), cloud vehicle (adaptive).
  - Available forms (silver rank): Cloud palace (grand), cloud palace (adaptive).
- 

The cloud flask shrank down the size of a thumb, floated over to the amulet and attached itself to the crystal chain.

“Well, that’s convenient.”

\*\*\*

In Venice, Farrah, Dawn and Jason’s family were in a cloud construct disguised as a yacht, watching a news website covering the transformation zone in Slovakia. There was little information as no media personnel were allowed close to the dome. Jason’s arrival had been witnessed at a distance and they had seen many of the forces around the dome go running up the dome after him, despite the steep, slick surface. No information was coming out, though, reducing the coverage to little more than endless rounds of postulation.

“I’m sure your uncle is fine,” Erika assured her daughter. “You don’t need to sit watching this for hours on end.”

“Your mother is right,” Farrah said. “You know what he’s like. He’ll swagger back in, insufferably smug, and won’t shut up about saving the world for a month. He’ll probably even get some stupid new power or a crazy magic item or something.”

Suddenly the cloud palace was flooded with Jason’s aura, which everyone but Emi could sense.

“Is he...?” Farrah asked of Dawn.

“This isn’t him,” Dawn said. “This is the cloud construct.”

The disguised exterior of the cloud construct rippled, like the surface of a pond after a stone was dropped into it, although no one was around at the abandoned dock to see. On the inside, the cloud stuff started to change. The white cloud stuff turned a dark but vibrant blue, while the sunset gold and blues become bright, wild colours and patterns of a space nebula. There bright reds and greens, yellows and purples, churning and flowing.

“What’s happening?” Erika asked. “Did something happen to Jason?”

“Did he take a bunch of LSD?” her husband Ian wondered.

"I don't know what's going on," Farrah said.

The colours started to slow their kaleidoscopic swirling across the wall, the white colour coming back. The other colours became more subdued, although they were different from what came before, the sunset colours replaced with the brighter and more varied nebula shades. The sense of Jason's aura diminished but didn't vanish entirely.

"Do not be concerned," Dawn said. "It would appear that whatever Asano is experiencing, it has allowed him to forge a deeper connection with his cloud flask."

"You know almost everyone here is an Asano, right?" Emi asked. "You should call him Jason or you're just being rude."

Dawn was uncertain how to respond to that so she didn't and turned once more to Farrah.

"It would appear that you were correct, Miss Hurin, in positing that he would reap gains during this event."

"See," Farrah complained. "Even dying makes him come back stronger. That guy could fall into a pit trap and he'd crawl out with a beautiful woman and a sack of cash."

\*\*\*

Inside Jason's spirit domain, his sword was taking longer than the other items to deepen the soul-bond. The sword felt the most discordant of the three items, filled with potential but hampered by the limitations of its form. It strained to exert the power constrained within it, yearning to be reforged.

---

➤ [Dread Salvation] has been added to set [Regalia of the Dark Hegemon].

Item: [Dread Salvation] (bronze rank [growth], legendary)

*A sword awaiting the chance to be the iron fist of the hegemon. The original creator must demonstrate his growth and reforge the weapon for it to surpass its origins and fulfil its potential (weapon, sword).*

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else. This bond allows the weapon to share the wielder's ability to ignore rank disparity.
- Effect: You may imbue your aura into the weapon, increasing its damage for an ongoing mana cost. Damage and cost scales with the amount of aura strength imbued, up to the limitations of the weapon's current state. Aura strength over that required for the maximum damage output reduces the mana cost.
- Current rank: Bronze.
- Current maximum damage increase: Moderate.



- Current maximum mana cost: Low. Decreased from moderate by wielder's aura strength. Mana cost cannot be eliminated entirely, regardless of the wielder's aura strength.
  - Effect: ??? (Sealed).
  - Effect (Regalia of the Hegemon): Enemies struck with this weapon are subjected to a mild mana drain effect and are inflicted with [Hegemon's Tribute].
  - [Hegemon's Tribute] (affliction, magic): Anyone affected by Hegemon's tribute is subject to a mild, ongoing mana drain effect by the wielder of [Dread Salvation] so long as they remain within the wielder's aura. If this affliction is cleansed or the subject dies, a final burst of mana is drained.
  - Growth conditions (silver): Sealed.
  - [Dread Salvation] has reached the maximum potential of its current form. It must be reforged by the original craftsman in order to advance further.
- 

The items stopped floating around Jason as the mist that the triune had turned into faded away. They gently drifted back down onto the table as Jason looked over the extensive description windows. After reviewing it all, he placed the necklace with the amulet and the miniaturised flask around his neck. The sword he slid back into its scabbard. Then he looked out over the dark landscape that seemed a little less intimidating than before.

"Alright," he said to no one. As when he first arrived in Farrah's world, he found himself alone and talking to himself. He was eager for Shade to be released so he had someone to make wildly outdated and barely relevant pop culture references to.

"Time to get to work."

## Chapter 412

### You Have to Be True to Yourself

The mist produced by his cloud flask in amulet form swirled around Jason, mostly gathering around his feet as if only slightly heavier than air.

“It’s like there’s a dry ice machine hidden in my underpants.”

By concentrating, he could make the mist take various forms. A shield was easy to produce and an obvious use but he knew the defensive properties would be mediocre. He continued to experiment and established several things about his cloud flasks new abilities. He could send the mist to form a construct anywhere within his aura range that he could see, but once it was formed it could no longer move, dashing his hopes of flying on a cloud like the Monkey King. Floating furniture was easy and convenient, but fine, precision objects like keys or wire mesh were out of the question. What he could do was create multiple, small constructs at once.

Sophie had an ability called cloud step that allowed her to treat the air as solid ground. Now that Jason could make cloud constructs, he could do the same with actual clouds allowing him to air walk on them like floating steps.

His silver-rank agility would allow him to make acrobatic use of it in combat, although it would take some practise first. While extreme mobility had long been a part of his training, he was far behind Sophie in combat acrobatics.

Fortunately, Jason anticipated no shortage of chances to practise. He made his way down the stairs, to the landing between the third storey, which he already claimed, and the second storey, where his spirit domain currently ended.

- 
- You are at the border of your spirit domain. Minimum cost to expand: 3 [Stable Genesis Cores]. Would you like to expand your spirit domain?
- 

He gave his mental assent.

- 
- How many [Stable Genesis Cores] will you expend to expand your spirit domain (26 available)?
- 

It had taken a total of nine cores to claim each floor, which thus far he had done in patches.

“Nine,” Jason said as he drew his sword. He started walking down the stairs as they transformed into dark crystal.

- 
- Your spirit domain has expanded.
  - Interaction with genesis space has instigated uncontrolled secondary evolution of ability [Spirit Vault]. Further interaction will complete evolution.
  - Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised and refined the secondary evolution path of [Spirit Vault].
  - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 1.936%.
- 

Jason concentrated his aura on the sword in his hand as he reached the bottom of the stairs. He fed as much of his aura strength into it as he could but its capacity was disappointingly limited.

- 
- Damage of [Dread Salvation] has been enhanced to maximum current level
  - Current damage increase: Moderate.
  - Ongoing mana cost: Low.
- 

He could already hear the anomalies scrambling in his direction. The first three reached him quickly, one humanoid, one snake with a giant eyeball instead of a head and one scorpion with no pincers but multiple tails. At the end of each tail, instead of a stinger, there was a baby's face, mouths wide open to reveal long, pointed teeth.

Jason only reflected for a moment on the macabre creatures before rushing to meet them. The snake leapt forward and Jason met it with the sword point on, burying the blade to the hilt through the creature's bulbous eye. No longer subject to silver-rank damage reduction, the powered-up sword was finally showing its worth. With its damage enhanced, it plunged easily into the snake anomaly, killing it immediately.

The scorpion skittered forward and Jason launched into a spinning flip, severing all three tails in a horizontal slash and landing in a crouch. Springing back up, he made short work of the humanoid anomaly, taking off an arm and then a head before it collapsed. He kept moving, wanting to catch out the anomalies before too many of them bunched together.

\*\*\*

By the time he was done with the entire level, Jason had dealt with sixteen anomalies on that floor. There didn't seem to be a set number of anomalies per genesis core used to expand his territory. As far as Jason could tell it was a combination of individual anomaly strength and total size of the domain. The larger it got, the more anomalies appeared per core used to expand it.

Condensing his mist shroud into a chair, he sat down to take stock of what he had learned. For one thing, the anomalies were even weaker than he thought, despite their silver-rank auras. Aside from their silver-rank damage reduction, few showed any power beyond that of a bronze-rank monster. With his silver-rank attributes and newly empowered sword, Jason could easily mow through the living anomalies. He had a sneaking suspicion that things would not remain quite so easy as he continued expanding the domain.

His other gain was a better understanding of what he could do and accomplish with his mist shroud. Even against the weak creatures, the objects he could create provided no real defence but were useful for obscuring vision and delaying an opponent for a brief but critical moment.

Jason hadn't come out of the fights unscathed, so he rested in the chair long enough for Colin's regenerative powers to restore him. Then he stood up and moved to loot the scattered anomalies before heading for the last of the building's five floors.

\*\*\*

After Jason entered the portal set into the top of the dome, the factions waiting to exploit the transformation zone gathered around the portal. Each unwilling to surrender benefits to the others, they were still negotiating who should go in when the portal sealed, shortly after Jason had vanished through it. The ring of crystal set into the dome remained, but inside it, the roiling energy was cut off by the same glassy surface as the rest of the dome.

\*\*\*

Jason completed the ground floor at a run, hitting his stride as he made short work of the anomalies. The entire building was now incorporated into his spirit domain.

- 
- You have overtaken a genesis space territory and purged all anomalous elements.
  - Completed territory is being remade.
- 

Everything in the hotel had been changed into dark crystal as he claimed it but otherwise remained the same. Shortly after the last anomaly was looted and dissolved, that started to change as the entire building was restructured. The crystal started shifting around him, walls breaking apart and morphing into new shapes. He stood rooted on the spot, worried about getting caught up in the transformation.

It quickly became apparent that the building was transforming into a larger version of the pagoda from Jason's spirit vault. As alcoves started appearing in the wall for flowers to

grow out from, this became even more apparent. These were the same flowers that appeared in the gardens that sprawled around the pagoda in his spirit vault.

Jason knew that his task was to stabilise the transformation zone that failed to consolidate due to merging with a proto-space. Now he discovered that meant turning the transformation space into an oversized replica of his soul. The problem was that, as far as he could tell, the proto-space had made the space inside the dome larger than the space it occupied outside.

Jason had no idea how much territory he would have to claim to effectively stabilise the transformation zone. Enough to cover the original space or the expanded area created by the proto-space? What would happen when the dome no longer separated the space outside from the space inside? He was pretty sure that the same place trying to be two different sizes at the same time would be very, very bad.

Finally, the changes to the building were completed, leaving Jason in a large atrium on the ground level. He could sense that the space around him had changed, becoming more stable. It had the heavy permanence of node space, rather than the chaotic fragility of a proto-space in the process of collapse.

Looking around, the dominant feature of the atrium was the water spilling down from the mezzanine second level dropping into a pool in the middle of the atrium floor.

- 
- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
  - Territory has been renamed [Arrival Pagoda].
  
  - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 4.1%.
  
  - Anomalies attacking as a result of further spirit domain expansion will have increased power.
- 

“And there it is,” Jason said, reading the system message. “I knew it was too easy.”

\*\*\*

When the portal atop the dome unexpectedly opened again, the various forces gathered around it watched one another nervously. They still wanted to stop anyone else from seizing whatever treasures lay within but also didn't want to miss another window for entry. The local faction leaders stood around the portal, only their most important subordinates with them by unspoken consensus. They came to an agreement and volunteered some bronze-rankers to go through. One vampire, one essence user and one of the EOA's personnel were selected, although the Network factions were unhappy about

having one person represent them all. This was especially true when it was the network ritualists who had been trying to open the portal back up, albeit to little effect.

The results of entering the portal were not good as the people who went in stumbled back out after only a few moments, looking as if they'd been dipped in acid. This put paid to sending anyone else through until the Network faction put forward a proposal. Their ritualists would collaborate on finding a way to enter safely, on the condition that all the Network factions could send participants individually for the next attempted to go inside. That meant the old leadership faction, the Americans, the Global Defence Network and the Chinese, who had belatedly arrived.

The Chinese Network branches had been keeping to themselves while an information blackout all but sealed off the country. Normally, other factions and governments would have taken the time and effort to pierce that veil but with the world in chaos, if anyone had, they were keeping to themselves. Rumours of what China's Network branches were up to ranged from they'd been overrun by the Cabal to they had taken over their own country, more successfully than the Americans had with theirs.

At first, the Slovakia transformation zone was one more event the Chinese didn't show up for, but following Jason's arrival and entry, they had mobilised their forces and claimed a site around the dome. Now the leader of the Chinese forces, Miss Li, proposed that the Network factions pool the knowledge of their ritualists to find a safe means of entry.

The other factions reluctantly accepted and the Network immediately presented dimensional probes. It turned out that every faction had the same idea and had already been reinforcing the probes they used to test proto-space apertures in preparation.

\*\*\*

Jason explored the pagoda, which was a broad and elaborate residential complex. The dark crystal remained the primary construction material but now it was filled with furniture and plants everywhere. Flowering plants covered the walls like wallpaper, their bright colours forming nebula-like patterns.

"Gordon, were you in charge of the decoration?"

The furniture was more subdued, with dark wood and light fabric, providing a sober contrast to the colourful flowers. What Jason liked the most was the breeze that gently tussled at his clothes and carried the delicate scent of flowers through the rooms and hallways.

The building wasn't even the same shape as it had been, having changed from a rectangular box to an octagonal design. The roof was no longer accessible, being sloped

instead of flat, but each floor had balconies running around the outside. As he wandered around, Jason found the hotel turned into what was a lot like a high-end apartment building.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to charge a lot of rent,” Jason mused as he walked through a wide hallway washed with cool light by crystals set into the ceiling. There was even a water feature that ran through the central hallways on every floor, all running down to a waterfall giving the hallway a courtyard feel with the plants and the high ceiling.

Jason followed his senses to the fourth floor, where he had sensed the portal he arrived through open back up as the territory reshaped itself. Now, instead of a circle in the ceiling, it was a more familiar arch. It was set in place as a permanent fixture in a room dedicated to it and Jason looked around curiously.

“It’s kind of like a bathroom except with a portal instead of a place to do a poo.”

As he watched the active portal, a small drone floated through and he grabbed it. Immediately it started dissolving like ice plunged into boiling water and was gone after a few seconds.

“Huh.”

\*\*\*

“Well?” Miss Li demanded of the drone operator. They were next to the portal, the operator holding a tablet that should have been receiving data.

“No signal at all,” the operator said. “Not even a destruct signal. I don’t think anything can get through the portal.”

Jason head popped up through the portal and looked around curiously.

“Oh, g’day, Miss Li. It’s been a while, do you remember me? It’s Jason. Jason Asano.”

Miss Li had been part of the team that attempted to recruit Jason to China’s cause after the Network became aware of who and what he was. She glared at what looked like Jason’s disembodied head, sticking out of the portal.

“I remember, Mr Asano. I also remember the discourtesy you showed my country during your unannounced visit.”

“My what? Oh, the thing where I sent all that concentration camp footage to... um, I mean, what footage? I mean, I didn’t say footage. Visit where, now? Uh... how you livin’ girl?”

The vampires, essence users and EOA enhanced humans all looked at Jason in confused, awkward silence.

“I’m just going to go,” Jason said sheepishly and his head ducked back inside.

\*\*\*

Jason's head felt very tingly after being in a reality very different in nature to what his body was and he shook his head.

"I kind of like it."

He wondered about the events going on outside briefly before pushing them aside as irrelevant. Even in Jason's domain, the caustic energy of a node space was still present, so they were welcome to try coming in.

"That Miss Li still has that formal yet sultry thing going on. Too bad she's evil."

During the six months in which he wandered across Asia, Europe and Africa, Jason had spent a decent amount of that in China. He had not liked what he discovered about how the Network branches there were operating and sowed a few seeds of trouble before moving on.

Another drone came through, suffering the same fate as the first.

"Good luck with that," Jason said and left the room.

He made his way down the levels of the pagoda, feeling relief at having a way out of the transformation zone. There was no telling exactly how much he needed to stabilise it to stave off disaster, so at least now he could push things as far as possible without getting himself killed and then leave, hoping that he'd done enough.

He reached the second floor and jumped off the mezzanine right before remembering he no longer had his slow fall cloak. His silver-rank body could easily endure the fall but his pride could not and he desperately formed a cloud bed to catch himself, right before he smacked into the ground.

"That worked out nicely," he said, nodding his approval as he put his hands behind his head. He considered the pagoda-shaped residential complex, from the water feature hallways to the ubiquitous wall planters to the vast atrium with its own waterfall. He hadn't found the source of the water, although he never really looked. At this point in his life, it wasn't worth investigating ever little bit of magic or he'd never get anything done.

"None of this building is very pagoda-like on the inside," Jason said, looking around. "If all this was made by my soul, I think my soul might be a failed architect. I'll think going warlock ninja as a profession was the right call."

Jason looked at the double doors leading to the outside to whatever new challenges lay beyond.

"Don't open them both," he told himself. "You only need one door. Opening them both would be cheesy and melodramatic. For once, don't be a chuuni and go through one door like a regular person."



Walking up, he pushed both doors open.

“I guess, in life, you have to be true to yourself.”

## Chapter 413

### One More Secret

Jason looked around suspiciously at a mostly modern metropolitan street, with a few anachronistic quirks. Most of the buildings were three or four storeys high, packed close together and the ground level filled with storefronts.

“This was definitely farmland before the transformation zone appeared.”

When he had been on the roof of the hotel before its transformation, Jason hadn't seen any of the cityscape that should have been easy to spot, even through the gloom.

Looking over the city street, mostly everything looked modern but a few elements stood out as unusual. The streetlamps glowed with electric light, yet had a strange design like old gas lamps. In the window of one of the stores was a television that looked right out of the sixties.

Most out of place were the cars, looking like set dressing for some retro-future film. A mix of familiar and strange, new and old, they blended the rounded designs of sixties cars with sci-fi elements like light shining out from between the body panels.

“There's kind of an old-school Batmobile thing going on,” Jason said, moving closer to examine a black car. “Shade do you think...”

Jason's shoulders slumped as he trailed off, remembering. He could feel the familiars inside him but couldn't call them out, which angered him more than having all his other powers sealed. More than the powers they offered, his familiars were his ever-reliable companions and without them he was alone.

Having lost the taste for exploring, Jason looked around with more assessing purpose than curiosity. The Pagoda stood out on the city street. Prominently occupying a huge roundabout, the dark stone building was an archaic contrast to the city around it.

Despite the familiarity of the city setting, there were discordantly alien aspects to it. The signage on the buildings was alien, and while Jason could read it with his translation power, he recognised neither the language nor the alphabet it used.

Jason wandered around, alert but not tense. In each previous instance, anomalies hadn't appeared until he expanded his spirit domain, giving him the chance to explore first. He wasn't ruling out that changing but neither was he walking on a knife's edge in his readiness. He approached a shopfront and the door slid open. It looked like an ordinary clothing store inside.

He explored a little further, finding another hotel, a café and what looked to be a pharmacy. As he moved, he could only see around a dozen metres through the gloom.

Otherwise, all he could see were the stars in the sky and the pale glow of the street lamps, like a procession of willow-'o-the-wisps.

"I don't suppose there's a gun store around here."

\*\*\*

High over Slovakia, a man flew through the sky, shrouded in a nimbus of light. Moving faster than the speed of sound, he slowed as the giant dome of the transformation zone came into view. Continuing to decelerate as he descended, he landed amongst the people gathered around the portal on top of the dome.

Li Li-Mei bowed at the arrival of the man, whose handsome features had been rendered ageless by his gold rank.

"Mr Chen," she greeted him.

"Little Mei," Chen said warmly. "How could I not come when you ask? And now you're so big and strong, am I not good enough to call uncle anymore?"

"Uncle," Li said, blushing slightly. "I am glad that we have been able to awaken you from your long slumber."

"I wish my wife felt the same," Chen said with a chuckle.

The others around the portal had varying reactions to Chen's arrival. He shared acknowledging nods with the two Chinese gold-rankers that had arrived with Miss Li, theirs slightly deeper than his as a gentle acknowledgement of his primacy.

Most of the other people gathered were the most powerful members of their factions present, most notably the vampire lords. None were happy that there were now three Chinese gold rankers. Not only did it give them the advantage in power but suggested that China had enough gold-ranked essence users to spare three of them for a single task.

The ancient vampires, especially, were seething. Unused to accepting equals, let alone superiors, they nonetheless held back their usual domineering arrogance. The vampires had learned the hard way that one-on-one, a vampire was no match for an essence user of equal power. Normally they compensated with numbers, but six vampires against three essence users was a questionable risk at best. It was only made worse by the return of Jack Gerling.

Drawn by the arrival of another gold-ranker, Gerling returned to the portal, arriving less aggressively than the last time by moderating the pace of his explosive-driven flight. Chen looked at Gerling as he arrived, giving him a nod.

"Mr Gerling. I would never have expected to meet you again after all this time. Still playing pig to catch the tiger?"

“Mr Chen,” Gerling greeted in turn. “Still acting like a friendly neighbourhood uncle as you sail down a river of blood?”

Both men laughed, their smiles not reaching their eyes.

“My old friend’s lovely daughter has asked me to take a look and see if I can’t find a way inside,” Chen said. “If I can, would you care to join us? I think we can comfortably leave the leeches behind.”

The vampires watching on stirred but held their tongues.

“If we can get in safely, then yes,” Gerling said. “I’ll take you up on that.”

Gerling had been unwilling to test the waters alone, but if the old dog Chen and his aggravating shield powers were brought into play, that changed things considerably. There was, of course, the potential for betrayal, but the various Network branches were all aware of the common enemy. Category four essence users were few and far between, with this gathering of four possibly being unprecedented, while more vampire lords crawled out of the earth every day.

\*\*\*

Jason was standing outside the pagoda’s front doors.

- 
- You are at the border of your spirit domain.
  - Your spirit domain occupies one territory. Expansion requires encroaching on the surrounding territory.
  - Minimum cost to expand: 31 [Stable Genesis Cores]. Would you like to expand your spirit domain?
- 

Thirty-one cores were more than triple what the cost to claim each floor of the building had been, and that was the minimum to expand into the surrounding territory. He certainly wasn't going to try using cores above the minimum amount when he had already been warned of stronger anomalies.

He spent the cores and the ground around the pagoda started to change. Like a shadow passing overhead, transformation swept out, taking in the street, buildings and cars. To Jason’s surprise, the shift wasn’t all to dark crystal, the way the hotel had been. It was certainly an element, being incorporated into the road surface especially, but the environment, in general, went through a much more sophisticated transfiguration than the building had when the territory completed. Even so, Jason was certain that the territory he was now digging into was larger than this first section.

What stood out the most was that while the streets were dark crystal, the buildings were made from a substance reminiscent of Jason's cloud house. The materials were more solid, but the colours and textures of the buildings were very familiar, with lots of summer cloud white splashed with other wild colours. A large part of this was the largest structural change, which was a massive increase in plant life. Rows of trees ran down traffic islands between street lanes and planters lined the footpaths with bright flowers.

All of this was easy to observe because the gloom was pushed back by the expansion of Jason's domain, allowing bright starlight to shine down. It left many of the colours seeming subdued and washed out but was a great improvement over the pervasive dark.

The cars went largely unchanged, although their designs became sleeker and less rounded, with slick metallic paint jobs. Those with more pastel colours turned to mostly dark shades of red, green and black, although Jason spotted one that was a hot pink that he rather liked the look of.

- 
- Your spirit domain has expanded.
  - Interaction with genesis space has instigated uncontrolled secondary evolution of ability [Spirit Vault]. Further interaction will complete evolution.
  - Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised and refined the secondary evolution path of [Spirit Vault].
  - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 4.7%.
- 

That wasn't a big boost to his skill evolution. It appeared that completing territories was much more effective than general expansion. Jason postulated that this reflected that claiming a sufficient number of territories was required to stabilise the space as a whole. This fit with Jason's existing assumptions but it was nice to have some supporting evidence.

The expansion extended to the end of the street some fifty metres away, beyond which the gloom continued to obstruct Jason's vision. Jason prepared himself for an onslaught of living anomalies but the freshly transformed streets remained silent. After waiting for a minute, sword in hand, Jason resheathed it and started walking around the outside of the pagoda, watching out for sudden attacks.

The new territory he was encroaching upon was significantly larger than the building, which it completely surrounded. After completely circling the pagoda and seeing his domain spread the same distance in each direction, Jason set out towards the new edge of his spirit domain.

\*\*\*

Standing on top of the dome, Chen conjured up a large dark red cauldron that was filled with impenetrable darkness. The cauldron emitted a thick, coppery scent of hot blood. A red and white orb floated up from the pot, a grotesque bloodshot eyeball the size of a basketball. Chen cast a fairly lengthy spell and a shimmering red force field appeared around it. The cauldron vanished and the orb floated over to the portal and plunged into it.

\*\*\*

Jason grew increasingly wary as he moved closer to the new border of his domain without spotting any anomalies. His aura senses grew stronger and more widespread with each expansion of his domain but still stopped dead at the end of his territory. As he moved closer to the gloom surrounding his starlit section of city like a black fog, he started to make out what might have been shapes in the dark. Again he lamented to loss of his powers, knowing they could easily be fabrications of his anxiety.

Once the shapes in the dark started to move, he knew it wasn't anxiety. All of a sudden, people started rushing out of the gloom; a rabid army of what looked like ordinary people sent into a frenzied rage, brandishing tyre irons, lengths of pipe, planks with nails and a panoply of sporting equipment. They came spilling out of the darkness like a wave.

"Oh shi—"

\*\*\*

The eye orb returned from the portal, its red shield gone and looking much the worse for wear, like half-melted ice cream in a flavour that no one wanted. Chen conjured the cauldron again and the orb disappeared into it. As it did, the information it had gathered entered into Chen's mind.

"I see," he said. "It seems that there are several challenges to safely traversing the space beyond the portal. One is a pervasive and powerful aura. It is definitely silver rank but for raw strength, it rivals a gold-rank aura."

"That sounds like Asano's aura," Gerling said. "I tried to suppress it when we fought. It was like trying to crush an egg in your hand, only to realise it's a stone."

"I cannot be certain," Chen said. "The senses of my scouting orb were completely blocked. It could only detect the forces that pressed upon it directly. This is the second problem: I believe that essence powers are suppressed on the other side of the portal. My summon remained intact, so anything already in place is likely to remain, but I doubt new powers can be used."

"That's dangerous," Miss Li said.

“But not a deal-breaker,” Gerling said. “Even without powers, a gold-ranker puts most comic book characters to shame.”

“Agreed,” Chen said. “The final problem, however, is the most pressing. I believe that the space beyond the portal is, for lack of a better term, a mix of reality and unreality. From what my orb could make out of the forces working upon it, reality is in an uncertain state within the dome.”

“Like being inside Schrödinger’s box,” Miss Li said.

“Yes,” Chen said. “It’s as if the space on the other side of the portal is attempting to make things exist and not exist at the same time.”

“How does Asano withstand it?” Miss Li asked.

“One more secret he brought back from the other world,” Gerling said. “You can add it to the list.”

“What do we do if we encounter Asano?” Chen asked Miss Li. “Secure him?”

“No,” Miss Li said. “Help him. He’s consistently maintained that he’s trying to prevent some manner of doomsday and our analysts believe the probability of that being the case is high. So long as you are in there, if you meet him, help him. Otherwise, ascertain what gains can be made, with reality cores being the priority. For the first trip, scout and return. Once we have a better idea of what is in there we can plan accordingly.”

“Assuming we can get in there at all,” Gerling said. “Are your shields up to the task?”

“I believe I have what we need,” Chen said. “I have a shield that can protect against abnormal dimensional effects. The only drawback is that it consumes the shielded person’s mana to negate the forces it blocks. I can place this ability on each of us before we go in but the mana consumption will likely be large. I can’t supplement that, so you will need to manage your own mana. If you stray from the portal, make sure that you have enough to get back to it in time.”

\*\*\*

The wave of people flooded out of the gloom with roaring screams, descending on Jason. He didn’t even consider trying to fight the horde pouring down the street, immediately turning to run. He made for the pagoda but even as he did, his aura senses picked up more people appearing from thin air in the buildings around him. They rushed out through doors and even leapt through windows, sending glass shattering. Even being on the upper floors didn’t perturb them as they launched themselves out of second, third even fourth floors, with more leaping right off of rooftops.

Jason was startled by their berserker rage that left them with no sense of self-preservation. Many were dying or crippling themselves as they launched from high places,

with the survivors dragging themselves forward if they had to. Jason's first thought was that they were the people caught in the transformation zone, but to his senses they were identical to the living anomalies he had faced in the building. They might all seem like normal, if rabid people, but their auras were in no way human.

None of the people seemed to be spawning inside the pagoda but Jason was cut off before he could reach it as more of the horde streamed around the sides. He immediately swerved and dashed into an alley, the frenzied mob on his heels. They weren't a match for his silver rank speed but they were much faster than normal humans. Jason paused as one of them dropped down from the roof to hit the ground hard in front of him, then leapt over the berserk man's grasping arms to keep running.

His system had warned Jason that the living anomalies would become stronger. Instead, they seemed as weak or weaker, without any bizarre monstrous forms. Instead, they had strength in numbers. Jason went from fighting a few at a time in the hotel to facing what was easily hundreds, keenly feeling the absence of his powers.

Emerging from the other end of the alley, he found more of the mob bearing down on him. He started to use his cloud construct, condensing his mist shroud into small steps that let him climb through the air where they couldn't follow. He headed for a second storey window where he didn't sense any of the horde, only for one to appear in a flash of rainbow light as he reached it, already charging. It crashed through the glass and tackled him out of the air, sending them both falling to the ground below.



## Chapter 414

### Instinct is All We Have

Sprawled on the ground, Jason was hammered by a crowd of people-shaped anomalies with planks and pipes and cricket bats. His sword had skewered one of them right through the face, and it fell on top of him. Using it as a shield, he pushed up to his feet, although the corpse made a poor barrier. Attacks continued to rain down from every direction, pummelling his head, back and arms. One of the anomalies even bit into him like a zombie.

- 
- You have been afflicted with [Streptococcus].
  - You have resisted.
  
  - You have been afflicted with [Reality Dysphoria].
  - You already possess a gestalt physical/spiritual nature.
  - [Reality Dysphoria] has no effect.

---

Jason burst out of the crowd, running before too much of the anomaly horde crowded around him. He barrelled through groups of three or four charging at him while avoiding larger clusters as he sprinted for the pagoda. Even so, he continued to take repeated blows as he blasted past the anomalies.

He was reminded of his first fight with a silver-ranker when his team fought the archbishop of Purity, Nicholas Hendren. Their bronze-rank attacks seemed futile as he took hit after hit without slowing down. Jason absently wondered if the rabid anomalies felt the same frustration as he continued blowing past them. He doubted they had much capacity to think at all.

Jason's domain beyond the pagoda wasn't that large and, even impeded, he was moving with silver rank speed. He neared the pagoda swiftly but there was a crowd of anomalies around it as if they had anticipated his retreat. Not slowing down, Jason started condensing his mist shroud into steps, running over the head of the anomalies and onto the second-floor balcony.

- 
- You have abandoned your incomplete spirit domain territory while anomalies are present.
  
  - Your spirit domain will retract over time until you return or all anomalies are destroyed.

- If anomalies remain when all non-territory domain space has reverted to genesis space, anomalies will be able to attack your completed territory.
- 

“Oh, strewth,” Jason complained, rolling his shoulders painfully. None of the attacks had been critical but he felt like he’d been run over by a car. He was rapidly healing though, with the bite mark on his arm already closed. He turned to look out as the crowd of anomalies gathering like a sea around his pagoda. At least he could no longer sense new one spawning, although perhaps they would if he went back out.

“How am I going to deal with...”

He trailed off as he sensed a new presence emerge from the portal, quickly followed by three more.

“Ask and ye shall receive, I guess.”

Jason moved inside from the balcony and over to the elevator that provided an alternative to the stairs, pressing the button.

“I don’t know how they managed to get in, but I’ll take it.”

\*\*\*

Chen arrived through the portal, followed by Gerling and then the other two category fours from China. Guo was one of China’s weakest category fours, having earned his place in the program through family connections and was not widely respected by the others. The more capable Tran was Vietnamese, one of many talented essence users poached by China over the years.

They looked around at the dark crystal room with the wall planters as they adjusted to the effects of the space. There was a white wooden door but no windows, while light came from a crystal set into the ceiling. Their mana was rapidly being consumed by the shields that Chen had placed on them, but a category four’s mana pool was deep and being constantly replenished by their recovery attribute. It wasn’t enough to remain perpetually, but they would have a decent amount of freedom to explore.

Their powers were sealed off, yet the place was oddly comfortable. In the normal world, the low quality of magic meant that only the power of the reality cores sustained them, while the magic in this place was far richer. Aside from that was an aura pressing in on them that Gerling recognised. Like Jason had been on first arriving, their auras were completely suppressed and the ability to extend their aura senses with them. Only because the aura was imposing itself on them could they detect it.

“Asano,” Gerling muttered.

None of them were able to exercise their own auras, making resisting the aura pressing on them unpleasant, but it didn’t have any deleterious effect.

“Curious,” Chen said, looking around. “This doesn’t look anything like the agrarian land that the dome originally covered. Additionally, this room appears to have been built specifically to house the portal.”

They glanced at the still-open portal and the rainbow light within. They had all dropped into it, yet found themselves walking out of an archway. It was a disorienting switch, especially in addition to the normal queasiness and disorientation of passing through a portal.

"We're on the clock," Gerling said. "Let's go looking around."

The normal procedure for the factions on entering a fresh transformation zone was to scour it for the reality core. This was usually an easy task due to the cores lighting up like a beacon to magical senses. The hope was that this still-changing transformation zone would have more cores but cut off from their magical senses they couldn’t detect anything.

“Agreed,” Chen said. “We should remain as a group, at least until we have a better idea of what we’re dealing wi—”

He stopped as the door was flung open to reveal Jason Asano.

“Right, you lot,” Jason demanded. “Come with me.”

He turned to leave when Guo called out to him.

“You don’t tell us what to do, Asano.”

Jason turned back, pointed an arm at the portal and then closed his fist. The rainbow light in the portal vanished as it was sealed.

“I do now.”

Guo used his gold rank reflexed to grab Jason by the neck, dash across the hall outside the room and slam him into the wall.

“You think I can’t make you do whatever I want?”

Jason looked at Guo calmly, even as he was held against the wall by the throat, feet dangling. His voice was in no way choked off as he spoke.

“While I have no doubt you have a gleeful aptitude for cruelty, I’ve been tortured by the bloke who creates universes. Whatever you can do to me, I promise you that I’ve been through worse. Those shields won’t last forever, so, yeah; I don’t think you can make me do whatever you want. Now, put me down or I leave you in here until you dissolve like a soluble aspirin.”

Guo’s hand closed tighter on Jason’s neck.

“You’ll die here too.”

“I’ve died before. It never seems to stop me.”

“Guo, that’s enough!” Chen barked. He had let Guo off his leash long enough to get the measure of Asano and had found himself impressed. Guo would be an acceptable price to pay for the assistance of someone who clearly understood the space more than they did. Chen would happily kill Guo himself in trade for some of Asano’s secrets.

Guo reluctantly let Jason go, who dropped to the floor. Chen saw the heavy indentations of Guo's hand already healing on Jason's neck in a display of healing speed that rivalled a gold ranker.

“Do you have your powers?” Gerling asked, having noticed the same thing.

“No, but I have a little aura control.”

“A little bit?” Gerling asked, still feeling the power of Jason’s aura overwhelming the room.

“That’s not me,” Jason said. “That’s the place we’re in.”

“Why does this place have your aura?” Chen asked.

“Because I’m taking it over,” Jason said. “The proto space and the transformation zone aren’t playing nice. The instability is going to leave a wound in the side of the universe if we let it fester. I’m stabilising this place as best I can.”

“How?” Gerling asked.

“Yeah, because I’m going to tell you that,” Jason said. “Look, as I see it, you’ve got three options. One, you kill me, I come back to life and get on with saving the world while your shields crap out and you all die. I don’t know if you can come back from that, that’s your business. Two, you all sod off looking for loot, although I haven’t spotted any reality cores, so good luck. Then you eventually die. Three, you do what I say, maybe we save the world and I let you all out.”

“What guarantee do we have that you won’t just leave us in here anyway?” Gerling asked.

“Oh, I’m going to kill you, if you live long enough,” Jason said. “But not today. The Cabal is under new management and I think we all know that war is inevitable. You’re going to explode a lot of vampires before I put you down. Now, you’re not the only ones on a clock, so get your arses in gear and come with me.”

\*\*\*

Jason rode the elevator in his magic interdimensional pagoda, along with four powerful magicians, including the man who killed his brother.

"I used to work in retail stationery," he mused. "It's been an odd few years."

“Since we have agreed to help you,” Chen said, “would you be willing to offer a little reciprocation?”

“For help saving the world that you live on?” Jason asked pointedly. “What exactly do you have in mind?”

“You have repeatedly claimed that you are acting to save the world and our people are inclined to believe you. Beyond stating that claiming reality cores works against this end, however, you have offered up little information about the nature of the threat and how you will go about stopping it.”

“I’ll admit that I’ve been high-handed with my information,” Jason said. “That’s because I didn’t want people like you trying to use me once you found out what you could use me for. With the events of today, though, I think its safe to say that I’m now squarely in everyone’s attention.”

The elevator reached the ground floor and they stepped out, the gold-rankers looking around at the opulent atrium with the waterfall dropping into the middle of the floor.

“I’ve been trying to prevent a disaster from destroying our world,” Jason said. “This place threatens to accelerate that disaster precipitously. Once it’s dealt with, I’ll explain everything. From a safe distance.”

“I appreciate the concession,” Chen said. “What needs doing now?”

Jason pointed to the stone double doors.

“Outside there is a lot of things that look like angry people, but aren’t. They aren’t very strong but there’s a lot of them. We have to kill them all.”

\*\*\*

When Jason gestured at the doors and they swung open, the four gold-rankers shot out like missiles, with appropriately explosive results. Given the space to move around and swing his sword, Jason could quickly carve through the weak anomalies but the gold rankers were so powerful that the tighter they clustered the better.

Gerling didn’t have his explosion powers but it was hard to tell as a single swing of his fist burst two or even three anomaly heads like an overripe melon being hit by a baseball bat. The Vietnamese man, Tran, moved in swift, jerking motions, efficiently striking out with his fist like a boxer. His hands never stopped moving as he moved through the anomalies like a threshing machine.

Chen was even more clinical, wiping out anomalies faster than anyone. With his fingers clustered together like a bird’s beak, his hands pecked holed in the faces of anomalies, with two more being killed before the first hit the ground. Chen and Tran both demonstrated that not every essence user from Earth lacked the skill to match their power. The other Chinese gold-ranker was clearly the least capable of the group but even he was a force to be reckoned with by dint of raw power.

Jason participated, cleaning up the more scattered anomalies after the others passed through the crowd like a hurricane. Even with the gold rankers hammering away, there was no shortage of leftovers given the sheer numbers, Jason's sword flickered in the starlight, reaping anomalies at a pace that almost matched the weakest of the gold rankers.

Soon the ground was painted with the grim remnants of the anomalies, which appeared human when intact but were revealed to be human-shaped masses of flesh once their facades were blasted apart by the violent attacks of the gold-rankers. Looking around, Jason reflected on the fact that his own body was much the same.

They cleared out the open spaces and started going after the ones still in the buildings, with Jason directing the others to where he sensed them. More of the anomalies continued to spawn, but they seemed to do so at a rate commensurate with the number of live anomalies that had already invaded Jason's domain. When the place had been swarming, that swarm rapidly grew, the spawn rate diminishing as the gold-rankers aggressively thinned-out the numbers. After Jason sensed the last anomaly fall, he moved to the edge of his domain where it met the dark fog of gloom to be certain.

- 
- You are at the border of your spirit domain. Minimum cost to expand: 78 [Stable Genesis Cores].
  - Maximum strength of non-anomalies in your domain: gold-rank. On expanding your domain, anomaly strength will be proportional to the most powerful non-anomaly present.
  - You have insufficient cores to expand your domain.
- 

Since the domain could be expanded, that meant the existing anomalies were finished. That the next set of anomalies would be gold-rank if the gold-rank essence users remained was not completely a surprise, as Jason had already postulated that the space was reacting to his rank.

Gerling and Chen approached him as Guo and Tran were examined the dead anomalies.

"So it's done?" Gerling asked.

"Hmm?" Jason said, looking up distractedly from his system window. "No, it's barely begun. But you three have to leave. I'll open the portal back up."

"We can return, once we've replenished our mana," Chen said.

"No," Jason said. "I have to continue stabilising the zone and if you're here, the next lot of these things will be scaled to your power, not mine."

“Can we not leave, have you trigger the next set of them and then return?”

“Maybe,” Jason acknowledged. “A loophole that makes things that easy makes me suspicious, though. We might have gotten away with it once, but I’m not sure that this place would keep doing it.”

“You say that like this place has an intelligence,” Chen said.

“I don’t know about intelligence,” Jason said, “but I do know that cosmic forces can have a will. I’ve experienced it for myself. There’s something about this place. It’s like the fractured dream of a wounded animal, lashing out in its nightmare.”

“That seems like a jump,” Gerling said.

“Yeah,” Jason admitted. “But we’re through the looking glass, here. Sometimes instinct is all we have, even if it’s unreliable, and I don’t think trying to loophole a gaping wound in reality is a risk I want to take.”

“And if I do?” Gerling asked.

“Then you’re an idiot,” Jason said. “And for all you’re a huge bogan-looking prick, I don’t think you are.”

“What’s a bogan?”

“Hey!” Tran called out, striding towards the group with something bloody in his hands. “Don’t listen to him. This is why he wants us gone.”

## Chapter 415

### Step Back

Standing in the middle of the street, Jason looked at the spheres Tran was holding, still bloody from where they had been ripped out of the anomalies. Looking around, it wasn't hard to spot more given the thoroughness with which many anomalies had been dealt with. The spheres were the size of the genesis cores Jason had been using, but instead of rainbow colours, the energy swirling within was black and red. Jason suspected that the process of looting them, rather than ripping them directly out of corpses, changed the cores. Since the cores he used were specifically stable genesis cores, it was likely these others were the unstable variety.

"These," Tran said, holding one in each hand. "I bet these are the secret of this place."

"This place has a lot of secrets," Jason said.

"As do you, Mr Asano," Chen said.

"I bet this is how he imprints himself on this place," Guo said, coming up behind Tran. He also had a bloody core in each hand.

"Guo," Chen said. "Perhaps you should see if you can't claim some of this place for yourself, the way Mr Asano had. You're so much stronger than him, after all, so it shouldn't be a problem."

Any essence user understood instinctively how to use actively use items, simply trickling a little mana into them. Even with all their essence abilities sealed that didn't change.

"I would very strongly recommend against attempting using those cores," Jason said.

"You just want me to play test subject," Guo said, tossing the spheres at Chen who neatly stepped aside.

"I'll do it," Tran said. "Anything this Japanese can do, I can do better."

"Oh, racism," Jason said. "I'm sure that's going to help. Look, mate, you'll probably blow up or something. There's a bunch of conditions you need to meet before you can start claiming territory here, none of which you meet."

"You're just trying to hide the benefits you're taking for yourself," Tran said.

"So much for believing me about saving the world," Jason muttered and gestured at Gerling. "If someone absolutely has to have a go, have this guy do it."

"No chance," Gerling said.

"You'll probably be fine," Jason told him.



“No one is going to do anything with these spheres,” Chen declared, only to be proven wrong as red light surged from the spheres in Tran’s hands. Guo, Gerling and Chan looked on while Jason ducked into an alley before peering around the corner.

“Tran, don’t be a fool,” Chen said. “Stop this now.”

“Aren’t you sick of being a slave to reality cores?” Tran asked as the red glow spread from the spheres to engulf him. “We should be taking a cue from the vampires. We have the power. We should be in charge.”

“We have a larger duty,” Chen said, even as he backed off. Guo and Gerling did the same. As they watched, the red light stopped spreading and was instead drawn into Tran’s body. His body started bulging oddly, as if balloons were inflating inside it.

“I think he’s going to explode or go full Cronenberg,” Jason yelled in warning. Guo, Chen and Gerling retreated to the alley with Jason.

“What does Cronenberg mean?” Guo asked.

“We have more important matters to pay attention to,” Chen said. Tran had fallen to the ground and was thrashing around, screaming.

“He’s talking about David Cronenberg,” Gerling said.

“The man from *Star Trek: Discovery*?” Guo asked.

“That’s where you know him from?” Jason asked incredulously. “Weren’t you in a fridge for years?”

“I like Star Trek,” Guo said defensively.

“He was in, what?” Jason asked. “Two episodes?”

“Episodes five, nine and thirteen of season three,” Guo said.

“Seriously?” Gerling asked.

“I like Star Trek,” Guo said again.

“Focus!” Chen snapped.

“Okay, I don’t think your guy’s going to blow up,” Jason said. “His aura’s changing into something.”

“Into what?” Gerling growled. Having his powerful aura senses barely functional felt like being blinded.

“Definitely some kind of anomaly,” Jason said. “This place is taking him over. He’s not the same as all these things we just killed though. It almost feels like... oh, that’s probably bad.”

“What?” Gerling snarled.

“Based on his aura, I think he’s somewhere between anomaly and vampire,” Jason said.

“How is that possible?” Guo asked.

“We’re in the land of make-believe and you idiots started poking random stuff,” Jason said. “He could have turned into Starscream.”

“What is a star scream?” Chen asked.

“Screw this,” Gerling said and rushed out. Tran’s body had returned to a normal-looking state and he stopped thrashing and screaming, laying still on the ground. Gerling ran up and stomped his foot down hard on Tran’s chest, only for Tran to transform into mist. All Gerling’s foot smashed down on were now-empty clothes. The mist cloud moved away and reformed into Tran’s physical body, with red eyes, no clothes and a manic, predator grin.

“Go,” Chen ordered and also rushed out, Guo close behind. Jason remained in the alley.

Gerling met vampire Tran’s eyes and then collapsed to his knees, gripping in his head in both hands as he let out a roar of rage and pain. Tran’s hands grew into claws as Guo and Chen attacked, Guo getting raked across the face before Chen sent Tran flying through the air with a kick to the chest.

Chen's gold-rank strength sent Tran flying, but Tran's gold-rank agility allowed him to flip in the air and land in a crouch, facing Chen, who was already charging. Tran spat out a swiftly-spreading blood mist but Chen used his momentum to leap over it. Tran raked his own arm with a claw, sending an unnatural amount of blood spraying into the air. The blood droplets transmuted into a swarm of knuckle-sized mosquitos, latching onto Chen as he dropped from the air. Then Tran was hit by a flying car.

Gerling had shaken off the mental attack, looked at the blood mist and grabbed the first thing that came to hand, which was an automobile. It slammed Tran into a building and through the wall.

As Chen scraped off the mosquitos that had latched into his flesh, blood sprayed out with each one he tore away, Guo, with his slashed face and Gerling approached the hole in what was now a half-collapsed wall with a car sticking out of it.

“Watch out,” Jason called as he sensed a cluster of anomalies spawn inside the building and a large pack of hyenas poured out of the hole to attack the three gold-rankers. They were much faster and stronger than ordinary hyenas, jumping on Chen, who was still distracted by the mosquitos and Guo, who was just slower to react. The obliviousness of not having their usual senses was hurting them.

Gerling dodged one charging hyena, pivoting his body to punt it away with a kick. The next hyena leapt at him and he grabbed it by the upper and lower jaw before ripping it clean in half.

Tran followed the hyenas out of the hole, holding up a hand that had a fanged mouth set into the palm. A nine-foot tongue shot out like a whip, flicking towards Gerling. Gerling snatched it out of the air, only for fangs to stab out of the tongue and piercing his hand. Blood flowed from the small wounds abnormally fast and was soaked into the tongue. Gerling ignored it and yanked on the tongue, pulling Tran towards him.

He lunged forward to meet the stumbling Tran with his fist, only for Tran to turn to mist and wash right over Gerling, reforming behind him. The mist left a caustic residue on Gerling's skin, which Gerling also ignored like his other wounds. Spinning to attack again, Gerling was caught out when Tran threw back his head and let out a horrifying shriek, high and glass-shatteringly piercing.

Gerling was staggered as blood ran from his ears and he stumbled, off-balance. Jason, still watching from a distance, was only silver-rank and was far more affected by the shriek, clutching his head briefly before blacking out.

\*\*\*

Jason came to as he rapidly healed the damage, although he still couldn't hear and it felt like a spike had been driven through his head. Still disoriented, he wondered how he was even affected like that since he was long past hearing via a vulnerable eardrum.

Pushing himself to his feet, his head cleared enough to remember the situation at hand. Chen and Guo were both tethered to the ground by red chains as they fended off the attacks of the hyena pack.

Gerling was still fighting Tran but was the worse for wear. They had similar gold-rank attributes and were similar in combat skill. The difference was that Tran had vampire powers, while Gerling's powers remained sealed away.

Gerling fought well but Tran had tricks to escape whenever Gerling threatened heavy damage, while Gerling could not boast the same. The gold-ranker looked like Jason felt, bloody and beaten, yet he struggled defiantly on.

Jason wasn't fool enough to try and help without pulling out the trump card he really, really didn't want to but it was clear that the gold-rankers were going to lose. Gerling was suffering some kind of affliction, most likely the vampiric transformation curse. If enough of it affected him he would turn into a vampiric minion and Jason didn't have his cleansing power to stop it. Unhappily, Jason drew his sword and took a fist-sized lump of golden crystal from his inventory.

One of Tran's claw hands savagely slashed Gerling's arm, leaving it hanging limp. Tran grabbed the other arm, yanked it and slammed a fist into the elbow, bending it the wrong way. After pair of brutal knee strikes to the chest, Gerling doubled over and Tran bit into his neck.

Jason stepped out, striding towards the group fight, holding the crystal above his head and sending a trickle of mana into it.

---

Item: [True Light] (diamond rank, rare)

*True light of the sun, trapped in a single moment (consumable, crystallised light).*

➤ Effect: Consume to release the true light of the Sun.

---

Vampires were largely unaffected by the sunlight of Earth because it lacked magical strength. The diamond-rank light shining from the crystal was an entirely different matter and Jason felt the vampiric Tran's aura melt away like an ice cube under the hot sun as the crystal started emitting light.

The animals dissolved and scattered like mist in the wind, the chains binding Guo and Chan broke apart and melted into gobbets of thick, hot blood. Tran staggered, the diamond-rank sunlight making a mockery of his gold-rank strength. He struggled even to stand as Jason marched up, channelling aura into his sword.

The sword cut Tran's head clean off and Jason sent the body sprawling onto its back with a kick to the chest. After kicking the head away from the body, he moved over the fallen Tran's torso as he tossed his sword into the air and caught it in a backhand grip. After plunging it into the vampire's chest, he yanked the sword back and forth to make a hole. He shoved the light crystal into the vampire's chest cavity, right up against the heart.

As Jason stepped back, sunlight shone from within Tran's body, right through the skin. It started burning white-hot, from the inside out. The light of the crystal died after only a few moments but the damage was done and the vampire continued to burn.

---

➤ You have defeated [Reality-Dysphoric Anomaly].

---

Jason watched the body blacken as Gerling, Chen and Guo recovered. The flames died out and Jason crouched to examine the body.

---

➤ Would you like to loot [Reality-Dysphoric Anomaly]?

---

“It seems we owe you debt, Mr Asano,” Chen said. “I’m glad you have secrets enough still to resolve our situation.”

Jason slowly stood, his body stiff, turning to reveal a face twisted with anger and coated in blood spatter.

“Do you have any idea what I just gave up?” he demanded furiously. “Do you know what we could have done with that? The day will come when all those ancient vampires outside decide that they want to run the show and the thing I just used to save your worthless hides would have been our best weapon. We could have baited them into a massive conflict and used it to cripple enough of them that we could maybe even end it all in one stroke! You came because you wanted a head start on plundering this place and you’ve condemned the world to a war worse than it had any need to be.”

Chen looked contemplative, Guo looked angry and Gerling actually looked a little ashamed.

“You think I wanted to save you?” Jason asked. “I halfway contemplated letting him kill you all first and if I wasn’t worried about you pricks all turning into vampire minions I probably would have. The only reason I used that crystal was that without taking him down, I couldn’t finish the job I came in here to do.”

He turned to look at the pagoda’s upper floors, closed his eyes and then opened them again.

“The portal is open. Go, and don’t come back.”

Guo took a step toward Jason but Chen stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

“You might need us again,” Gerling said.

“Not worth the risk,” Jason said. “I don’t have a magic crystal for every time you cause more problems than you solve.”

“Mr Asano,” Chen said. “If we do not return with something to show for our efforts – and our loss – then it will be hard to convince our people not to come after you the moment you leave this place.”

“You’re going to do that whatever you bring back,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Chen said. “But there is a difference between seeking an opportunity and needing to salvage at least something from a costly debacle. Take a step back and give our people some face; allow us to take back some of these cores from the anomalies. Then we can step back in turn and not pursue you as furiously as we otherwise might.”

Jason looked from Chen to the dead Tran and back.

“Are you serious?” Jason asked. “You want cores after what they did to him?”

“They are dangerous, yes, but powerful,” Chen said. “Unless you have some reality cores to offer instead,” Chen said.

“Do you see any reality cores lying around?” Jason asked.

“No, but my senses are sealed. Yours are not.”

“Just take some of the bloody things and go,” Jason said.

“We will be taking the body of our fallen companion as well,” Chen said. As soon as he did, Tran started dissolving into rainbow smoke.

“I’ve stepped back far enough, Mr Chen.”

## Chapter 416

### Guns & Money

Jason, Chen, Guo and Gerling walked in the direction of the pagoda, through streets painted with dead anomalies.

“Just to be clear, you are renouncing any claim you might have to these bodies, outside of taking a few cores,” Jason said. His tone made it clear that it wasn’t a question.

A quirk of Jason’s looting ability was that he could only loot his own or unattended kills. It was likely that once the gold-rankers left, all the anomalies would count as unattended but he wanted to make sure they relinquished the rights to them. He didn’t want to risk being unable to loot enough cores to keep expanding his spirit domain.

“Of course,” Chen said. Jason knew that Chen had gleaned some insight into the nature of Jason’s ability from the exchange but that wasn’t enough to risk losing all the cores.

Around the pagoda was the area where the dead anomalies were at their thickest, having gathered around it while waiting for Jason and the others to emerge. They had done so in a storm of violence, leaving a sea of the dead. Picking their way through the bodies, Guo gathered up a half-dozen of the unstable black and red cores in his arms. Chen only took a pair of them, one in each hand. He looked at Guo carrying so many and was met by a challenging glare.

“What?” Guo asked.

“Nothing,” said Chen, who then glanced at the empty-handed Gerling.

“Aren’t you going to join us, Mr Gerling?”

Gerling looked at Jason, then at the core in Chen’s hands.

“I’m good,” Gerling said.

“I really think you should,” Chen insisted, “if only for the sake of caution.”

Chen’s eyes flicked in Guo’s direction and he shared a look with Gerling.

“Right,” Gerling said. “Need to avoid any mishaps.”

Jason observed the exchange and watched Gerling pick up a pair of cores.

“What are you talking about?” Guo asked.

“Let’s just get out of here,” Gerling said. “I’m running low on mana and I don’t want this shield to crap out.”

Jason led them to the elevator, escorting them up to the portal room. Guo gave Jason a hostile glare.

“We’re going to meet again,” Guo said. “Things will be very different outside your private magic land.”

Not waiting for a response, Guo carried his armload of unstable genesis cores through the portal. The other three watched the portal for reactions but there were no visible changes.

“Should we just leave these cores here?” Chen asked Jason. Having prevented Guo from suspecting the cores might be dangerous to carry through; neither he nor Gerling was going to take the same risk.

“I’ll take them,” Jason said, collecting the cores from Chen and Gerling.

“How long should we wait?” Gerling asked. “If those cores just explode immediately we should be fine, but if they do something weird on the other side, we might want to give it a minute.”

“You don’t have a minute,” Jason said. “Get out or I shut the portal, wait for you to die and then loot your corpses before getting on with what I came here to do.”

“Close that portal on us and we’ll make sure you die before we do,” Gerling said.

Jason flashed him a snake’s grin.

“Are you sure about that?” Jason asked. “Think about what happens when we meet. You try to catch me and I escape immediately. You lose to a vampire and I kill it easily. Are willing to bet your life on my bag of tricks being empty?”

Gerling’s huge frame towered over Jason, who looked up unflinchingly at the face of his brother’s killer. Chen reached up to put a hand on Gerling’s shoulder.

“That should be delay enough,” Chen said. “Mr Asano, I hope the next time we meet it will be as allies. I believe you’re an enemy I would rather not have.”

“Then you should be more discerning in the company you keep. That said, I imagine we will all stand together when the time comes. The vampires are too used to dominance to not try and take over and I suspect their numbers are greater than any of us realised.”

Chen nodded and then stepped through the portal without another word. Gerling gave Jason an angry but conflicted look before following.

\*\*\*

Jason went about the laborious task of touching each of the dead anomalies to loot them. Eventually, the streets were cleared, the anomalies all gone up in rainbow smoke. All that remained were some unstable genesis cores violently expelled from the anomalies and not converted to stable ones when he looted the bodies.

The haul was a huge boost to Jason’s coffers, with ten silver spirit coins and an equivalent value of bronze and iron coming from each one. It reached the point that Jason



was glad spirit coins appeared in his inventory as a simple counter or he'd need a storage pit like Scrooge McDuck.

There were also the expected stable genesis cores, although a good number of unstable ones had already been violently expelled from the anomalies and weren't converted by his loot power.

Aside from the spirit coins and the cores, he looted quite a lot of healing unguent and a handful of other items. There were a few mana potions, as well as a shape-changing potion that would allow for minor physical changes. Jason was familiar with such potions from the other world, although he had never used one. They could be used for disguise or to make more combative modifications, such as claws or bone spikes sticking out from the body. It generally wasn't considered a strong combat tool, but with his powers sealed, Jason would take anything he could get.

Jason's belt was enchanted to protect the potion vials in it from incidental damage. Jason hadn't used it since reaching silver rank because it was only iron-rank and the protections were ineffective against any threat that would push him hard enough to need a potion.

With Jason's abilities replenishing him more effectively than potions, it was only useful as a sword belt and he hadn't been using his sword, either. In his current circumstances, though, Jason was almost entirely reliant on items to boost his combat ability, even if the items were less than ideal.

The other objects he looted seemed to fit the retro-futuristic feel of the city before Jason started transforming it. One was a self-boiling kettle that looked halfway between a coffee machine from the fifties and a cartoon bomb.

"Does this really need to be silver rank?" he wondered, holding it in his hands. He shrugged, remembering that the other world had higher-rank cooking ingredients in high magic areas.

What most caught his eye was the selection of weapons that he looted, nine of them in total. The most attention-grabbing was a very large gun and some kind of bazooka. To Jason, the firearm looked like a steampunk minigun, while the rocket launcher would be at home in a Jetsons spin-off movie where Elroy got drafted and went to war.

Both weapons had a hopper on the top that looked suspiciously well-shaped to accommodate a genesis core. The minigun-looking weapon came complete with a shoulder strap so it could be carried slung and fired from the hip.

---

Item: [Instability Regulator] (silver rank, epic)

*A device that regulates and discharges the energy from unstable genesis cores in a relatively safe manner. For safety reasons, do not discharge device in the direction of nearby people or objects (weapon, gun).*

- **Effect:** Consumes an [Unstable Genesis Core] to fuel powerful energy discharges. Fully depleted cores are transmuted into [Genesis Reclamation Cores].
- 

The description didn't cover what a genesis reclamation core was, but he hoped it would help him accelerate claiming territory for his spirit domain. He had no idea how long the unstable transformation zone would hold together before it collapsed and tore a hole in the side of the universe.

Jason turned his attention to the bazooka.

---

**Item:** [Instability Agitator] (silver rank, uncommon)

*A weapon that further destabilises unstable genesis cores, shrouds them in a short-lived containment field and then launches them (weapon, grenade launcher).*

- **Effect:** Converts an [Unstable Genesis Core] into an explosive projectile.
- 

To Jason's mind, it was inferior to the minigun weapon, although if he needed to blow up something really big, it might be useful. He thought of the vast and distant silhouettes he had seen from the roof of his pagoda and realised that he would probably need a bigger bazooka.

The remaining weapons consisted of three identical ray gun pistols that looked right out of Buck Rogers, two in belt holsters and the other in a shoulder holster. There were two rifles, one in an old-school ray gun design like the pistols and one that had no barrel at all. He picked that one up to examine. It was largely silvery-metallic with rounded components, an aesthetic that continued to the orb on the end of a rod it had instead of a barrel.

---

**Item:** [Arc Rifle] (silver rank, rare)

*Lightning rifle (weapon, grenade launcher).*

- **Effect:** Consume mana to attack using electricity. Has a chance to chain attacks to secondary targets.
- 
- **Effect:** Has a chance to inflict [Muscle Paralysis] on targets with musculature or equivalent organic functionality.
- 
- **Effect:** Has a chance to deliver an electromagnetic surge to electronic devices.

---

“Lightning gun,” Jason said reverently. He immediately tested it out, firing a wild blast of blue-white lightning down the street. The arc bent in the air to strike a car by the side of the road.

“Homing lightning,” Jason said with a huge grin. The weapon consumed a large amount of mana even from a short burst, however. “Let’s call it an awesomeness tax.”

The arc rifle had a bandolier it came with that didn’t seem to attach to the gun in any way. Instead, it had some metal disks, the purpose of which Jason was unsure of until he spent some time examining them and realised they were magnetic.

Jason put on the bandolier and slung the arc rifle onto his back where it neatly clamped into place. He pulled out the rifle and stowed it on his back multiple times, finding that quickly grabbing it or putting it away was easy and reliable. It always seemed to find the magnetic grips and was held in place with just the right amount of force.

Given the smoothness of the action, he suspected the grips had some magic assistance for ease of use. Jason appreciated that more than a magic gun with extra features that might never get used. During his time on Earth, he had looted a lot of guns which he had handed over to the Network, many of which had pointless peripheral effects.

The last two weapons were for melee combat. One was a heavy iron gauntlet that went up to the elbow. It had similar effects to the lightning gun but with less mana consumption and the ability to serve as armour. It was far too bulky for Jason though, so it was quickly dropped into his inventory. The last weapon was an electrified rod, only a little shorter than his sword. He already had his sword, so it likewise went into the inventory.

After some debate, Jason risked trying to store unstable orbs in his inventory and found they were perfectly fine, even stacking safely in a single inventory slot and not occupying a lot of space. Then the heavy weapons went in.

The pistols he equipped directly. The two in belt holsters went on his right hip and back, with his sword remaining on his left hip. He then slung on the shoulder holster for the third.

---

Item: [Pulse Blaster] (silver rank, common)

*Energy pistol* (weapon, pistol).

- Effect: Fires a blast of energy at the cost of mana. Basic blasts are an efficient balance of power to mana cost.
  - 
  - Effect: Change up mana to fire a powerful but mana-inefficient blast.
-

Jason had tried magic guns in the past. He had never used them in combat because his powers were always the superior choice, but he was capable enough. Even at bronze-rank, the proprioception and reflexes of his speed attribute combined with the spatial awareness and sharp senses of his spirit attribute had been formidable. Although he would be no match for a practised expert, now that his attributes were silver-rank, he was confident he would adapt quickly.

With a small arsenal of guns at his disposal, Jason was much more confident about facing down another horde of anomalies. Ranged attack options and the ability to pull out the heavy weapons meant that, so long as he was careful, even a huge wave should be manageable. That was assuming, he reminded himself, that the next wave of anomalies was as weak as the last one.

The last items Jason had to look at were the two that came from looting the gold-ranker-turned-vampire, Tran. Looting powers on low-rankers only rifled through their possessions and dimensional storage space, if they had one. High-rakers, including Jason himself, were different. From a purely physical perspective, there was little difference between the body of a gold-ranker and a monster and looting powers affected them the same way.

Many silver-rankers and even some bronze rankers also had monster-like bodies made of what amounted to congealed magic. Jason himself had been like that from his very arrival in the other world, although his low-rank body had been made up of very impure magic. He still remembered passing out as his body instigated a massive purge on reaching iron-rank.

Along with the usual pile of coins, Jason had looted two items from Tran. The first was a black and red bracelet, which he looted directly, while the second was produced by Jason's outworlder ability, defiant, which gave him extra loot from powerful enemies. That item was a lamp made from silver and gold, with sapphire settings.

Neither item was useful to Jason in the immediacy but he anticipated both being valuable once he left the transformation zone behind. He put them in his inventory and turned his attention to once more expanding his domain.

## Chapter 417

### Old Habit

Jason expanded his spirit domain from atop a building, covered in guns and fully prepared to leap off into a superhero landing and start mowing down anomalies. His domain expanded out, adding more cityscape to Jason's incomplete second territory. The transformed landscape blended dark crystal construction with much brighter elements reminiscent of his cloud house. It also continued to bring more plant life into being, from rows of trees running down the streets to a garden-filled park.

As the newly-claimed space was more city, Jason was anticipating another wave of urban-variant angry villagers which turned out not to be the case. When the anomalies arrived they were still human, but far fewer in number. Dressed in spacesuit-like outfits, they were armed with the same kind of weapons Jason had looted from the last set of anomalies. He didn't spot either of the heavy weapons fuelled by genesis cores, but most were wielding the same blaster rifle he had looted from the last set of anomalies. He spotted one holding a copy of the devastating lightning gun.

Although the anomalies were only a fragment of what came before, it was still far from a small number. Jason's aura senses extended across his domain and he sensed them emerging all the way around what was becoming the vast circumference of his expanding territory. He wondered how vast it would be before his second territory was complete.

The new anomalies weren't just different from the previous ones in outfit and weaponry but also behaviour. Instead of rabidly tearing off to search Jason out, they were smarter and more cautious moving in small groups, observing their surroundings with guns at the ready. Rather than make the splashy entrance he had originally intended, Jason retreated down through the building, a four-floor department store. As he made his way down, he paused after spotting a poster in the menswear section advertising the Bertinelli Collection. It wasn't the time to go browsing clothes, so he moved on.

"I have to check that out after I have this shootout with a small army of astronauts."

He paused again.

"I know the fate of the world is at stake and I might die, but sometimes I just love my life."

\*\*\*

Jason waited for a group of the astronauts to walk past the doors of the department store before he approached the doors himself, causing the motion sensor to slide them

open. He briefly peppered the astronauts with blasts from the pistols held in each of his hands before ducking out of the way as they swung their weapons to return fire.

Of the group of five, Jason had taken out two with headshots before they started reacting, the energy from his guns blasting apart their helmets. His remaining shots were wild covering shots as he dashed out of the way, landing only glancing hits. The remaining three anomalies moved into the store, panning the room with their guns.

The first floor was ladies' wear and Jason crouched down as he moved amongst racks of clothes. He sheathed his pistols and drew his sword as he pulled up his tactical map outworlder ability. It wasn't something that he used a lot but was perfect for a complex environment where he needed to track enemies with more precision than just his aura senses.

Jason could already sense more anomalies approaching the store, drawn by the gunfire. The retro sci-fi blasters weren't as loud as ordinary guns firing supersonic slugs but neither were they quiet. He needed to take out the group he had already started on before more of them arrived.

He emerged behind the astronauts as they moved down a tight row, sliding his blade into the back of the rearmost one's neck. By the time the other two heard it drop dead, Jason was already gone as they stopped in place, swivelling their guns back and forth. Since they were kind enough to stop moving, Jason took advantage by popping back up and shooting each of them in the head with a single pistol blast.

Jason may not have had his cloak to blend into the shadows but he still had years of experience being a predator. The second group to arrive were killed without firing a shot. Jason then left the building as too many of the anomalies were converging on it. Making his way through the streets, dodging groups of anomalies, he went to the far side of his domain and lured more of the astronauts into a building to be killed off.

He repeated the pattern several times, moving to new areas and wiping out two or three groups before abandoning his position. It didn't always go perfectly and several times he holed up to rub healing unguent onto a wound but he was operating effectively. His concern was the anomalies with the lightning guns, of which he discovered there were three. Scouting them out, he realised that not only did they have the powerful weapons but they looked to have reinforced space suits. How strong they were he could only find out by testing them.

For his first attempt to take one out, Jason attacked on an open street. He picked his ambush location and waited for it to walk past, accompanied by a trio of rifle anomalies. He rose up and fired both pistols, landing multiple hits on the lightning gun anomaly's

head. The bolts struck the slow-moving astronaut's helmet straight on, which was scorched and blacked but not broken. The whole group turned their weapons on Jason, who ducked down and rolled away from the car.

Energy blasts sizzled past Jason or were blocked by the car. The arc from the electricity gun curved to latch onto the car, just as Jason had intended. He had immediately realised on using the lightning gun himself that the homing feature was both a strength and weakness, due to its indiscriminate nature.

Jason had been thorough in picking a spot with a ready escape path. He shot out the glass storefront next to him before dashing inside as energy blasts continued to fire in his direction. He holstered his pistols, pulled the minigun from his inventory. After slinging it over his shoulder he took out an unstable genesis core and dropped it into the hopper on top of the gun.

The moment the first anomaly came into view, Jason opened up with the gun, firing rapid, powerful energy discharges at a blistering pace. It chewed through the visible anomaly before Jason walked the stream of deadly fire back and forth in an arc, blasting through the wall and the anomalies on the other side of it. Jason sensed the all go down immediately, even the armoured spacesuit of the lightning gunner having been ripped apart.

Sensing another group approaching, Jason lugged the heavy weapon back out through the window and turned in their direction. Seeing the mess the gun had made of the anomalies, the car he had been hiding behind and even the wall on the other side of the street he didn't bother with anything tricky. He swung the gun in the direction of the corner they were approaching from and opened up as the anomalies came rushing around it.

Although he was tempted to keep mowing down enemies, the minigun didn't come with a shield. He knew that if enough gathered together they would gun him down like a firing squad, so he returned the gun to his inventory and got moving.

Jason managed to eliminate the other two other groups containing lightning gun wielders in similar fashion, although the last one left him in a bad position. The lightning gun chained an attack from the car Jason used for cover into Jason himself, inflicting him with muscle paralysis even as the minigun tore the anomaly apart.

Jason fell to the ground, barely managing to pull out a pistol to shoot the lightning gun anomaly's companions as they rushed around the car to attack him. He managed to gun them down but took blasts to the leg, shoulder and gut in the process. After chugging one of his few silver-rank healing potions he painfully stowed the minigun and staggered into

an adjacent building and rode its elevator up to the roof, then hit the emergency stop to prevent it from being used to follow him.

As he holed-up, applying healing ointment to his wounds, he sensed the remaining anomalies converging on his location. He had killed most of them by that stage but there was still somewhere in the vicinity of three dozen moving in on him.

Jason had the choice of trying to make a break for it wounded or giving himself time to heal more and the anomalies time to flood the building. He could risk trying to jump off the building, which would normally be fine but he was not going to be fully recovered either way. The risk was only moderate if he let himself heal up a bit but the consequences of getting it wrong were unacceptable. If he wound up crippled in front of a building full of enemies, he was dead.

Deciding the best course was to let the healing unguent do as much work as it could in the time he had, on top of Colin's tireless efforts, he monitored the approaching anomalies using his tactical map ability. Displaying maps of each of the three floors of the office building side by side, he watched as they slowly but surely made their way up, searching for him.

Jason was uncertain of how well he could handle them, given how many of them had come together. He would need to move before they completely converged on the rooftop. While Jason's raw physical and perceptual advantages helped him use guns with superhuman accuracy, he had no grasp of firearms tactics. He had been relying on variations of his usual stealth tactics, essentially treating the pistols as long, loud swords. It played to his strengths but would be less effective against larger groups where hit-and-run tactics would be harder to execute without being pinned down.

Jason pushed himself to his feet, sore but functional. With a dozen anomalies on each floor, his strike and hide methods would only take him so far before it turned into a shooting gallery. He was going to have to push himself to the limits to succeed.

He started by deactivating the emergency stop on the elevator and pressing the button for the floor below, then ducking out before the doors closed. He rushed down the stairs, stopping outside the door in the stairwell and pulling out the minigun again.

He quietly made his way through the door into a large cubicle pen where the anomalies were all pointing guns at the elevator that had just opened up. Jason unloaded on the room, smashing apart cubicles and gunning down anomalies. Catching them by surprise, only a few got off wild shots before they were cut apart by the energy discharges from the gun.



The minigun fell silent as the unstable genesis core was drained and Jason put the gun away. On his tactical map in the corner of his vision, he watched as the anomalies below swarmed towards the stairwell. He pulled out the sci-fi bazooka and another core, loading it into the top. Moving to the other side of the room, avoiding broken cubicle walls and massacred astronauts, he turned around and fired the weapon at the wall where the stairwell passed behind it.

The stairwell had two dozen anomalies storming up it, but they were destroyed as a good chunk of that side of the building was eradicated. Jason was blasted through the wall by the backwash of the blast, blacking out.

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In the cloud yacht in Venice, Jason's family continued to watch coverage of the Slovakian transformation zone.

"...no idea where the tentacle monster on top of the dome came from but the gathered forces continue to fight it even as it continues to grow..."

\*\*\*

Jason came to half-buried in debris in the middle of the street. Dried blood flaked off his eyes as he forced them open and his head swam, the world seeming to spin around him. He tried pushing a broken lump of plaster-covered brick off himself but a stabbing pain in his arm made him stop. He was pointedly aware that without Colin healing him, even while sealed away, he may not have woken up at all.

He shifted about enough to make sure nothing was stabbing into his body anywhere too serious and allowed himself time to heal until he could extricate himself. No anomalies showed up and would have likely have killed him already if any were going to. Finally, he dragged himself out of the debris and stripped off what remained of his clothes and sat all his weapons on the ground. The bloody, ragged remains of his outfit told the story of just how injured Jason had been, pushing even his silver-rank endurance to the limit. He left only his boxer shorts that had suffered remarkably little, the white with red love hearts pattern only a little bloodstained, despite the rest of him being largely coated red.

Suddenly thinking of something he hadn't done in a long time, Jason pulled a recording crystal from his inventory and tossed it into the air. Despite it being so long, the old habit felt comfortably familiar.

"I haven't done this in a while, the magic being kind of crap in my world so the recording crystals don't work so well," he said to the crystal. "I'll catch you all up at some point but I'm kind of in the middle of something right now. I guess I can hit the highlights. Farrah's alive; that's a winner. So am I, for that matter, which may be more surprising. I die

kind of a lot. Is three times a lot? I mean, three isn't a big number, but not many people hit the triple when it comes to carking it. I think three counts as a lot.”

He controlled the crystal with a gesture to pan around.

“I'm saving the world, so I'd best get back to it. As you can see, I'm standing in my underwear in the middle of the street, covered in blood, next to a building I just blew up. The street is in an extradimensional city I'm taking over so a hole doesn't get blasted in the side of the universe. Mondays, am I right? Oh, wait, you have a six-day week. Still, it's a day of the week, it's not that hard to pick up from context.”

Jason moved the crystal to focus back on him and waggled a disapproving finger at it.

“Clive, I know you've got questions but stop interrupting. People are trying to listen to the recording. Be courteous and wait.”

Jason pulled out a flask of cleaning solution and poured it over himself. It was something he made himself, from his skill book-derived alchemy abilities. It was a poor substitute for crystal wash but Jason had to put something in his cloud house after the crystal wash ran out. It stung as it reached his various wounds, Jason wincing like an eighties action hero when the love interest treats his wounds.

“Jory, if you're watching this, I want you to know I have a new appreciation for the quality of your crystal wash. I am going to need quite a lot of it once I get back, by the way. Like, a lot. I don't want to go running out again, so waaay more than last time.”

Jason tipped another flask of the cleaning solution over his weapons before putting them away.

“Anyway, none of my essence abilities work here, which sucks. I spent the last few hours fighting it out with a small army of astronauts with ray guns, which was pretty awesome. I'll explain what they are later.”

He took a look at the building he had been blasted out of. On the side where Jason woke up, it was utterly devastated. When he circumnavigated the building, he discovered that the other side was completely gone.

“Maybe I don't need a bigger bazooka. It's going to be hard finding something to loot.”

Remembering the department store and its menswear section, he turned and trudged in its direction.

“Now, getting some magic weapons was useful and all, but now for the real boost in power. It's time for a pants upgrade.”

## Chapter 418

### It's Still Not About Killing Monsters

The Bertinelli Collection in the menswear department of the department store Jason found had a very specific set of clothes. Modelled after the clothes designed for Jason by Gilbert Bertinelli in the other world, they fit like a glove. Unlike the originals, these were silver-rank, although none boasted any exceptional abilities. They were clothes, with some minor self-cleaning and self-repair functions, but mostly designed for casual wear. Gilbert's designs and material choices made them more durable than most but they were hardly adventuring gear. Many of Jason's original outfits had fallen to misadventure, in no small part because he and the threats he had faced had both come to outrank them.

The silver-rank replacements felt perfect sliding on, Jason hoped they wouldn't dissolve the moment he left the transformation space. Erika wouldn't like it if Jason showed up naked on the news. He also looked around at the goods that weren't just ranked-up reproductions of his old clothes.

Gilbert's Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman was a store that catered to the adventurer with armour that would put them in good stead, all the way until they ranked up. One of the first things Gary had warned Jason against was cheaping-out on equipment since it would cost more in the long term than investing in good gear from the start. The menswear department didn't have any of the heavy armour, but there was some of the lightweight cloth armour that Jason preferred and was a particular specialty of Gilbert's.

Jason looked around at outfits he had seen in Gilbert's store but never purchased, along with some that he had. There was a copy of his old trap weaver armour, which had served him excellently at iron-rank. It had stronger self-repair enchantments than the clothes, along with a plethora of additional features. There was even a replica of his bespoke bronze-rank armour that had been destroyed in Makassar. He wasn't going to wear them, since they were at their original rank, but he took both if only for sentimental reasons.

Jason loaded up his inventory's outfit tabs with new clothes and then looked over some of the silver-rank armour options, although the pickings were slim, being a menswear section rather than an actual armoury. There wasn't anything as fancy as his custom armour, but he picked up an outfit of black and dark green material. It highlighted Gilbert's expertise in getting as much protection as possible without compromising flexibility.

The outfit was a ranked up version of an inexpensive armour Jason had considered at iron-rank, before being convinced to splurge by Gary. It may have lacked features but even Gilbert's basic products didn't skimp on quality. Jason took off the fresh clothes he had slipped on and suited up in the armour.

"It's still not about killing monsters," he told his reflection in a wall mirror. "It's about how good you look while killing monsters."

\*\*\*

The next expansion of Jason's territory went smoothly, being a repeat of the rabid horde anomalies he had faced with the gold rankers. The minigun proved to be highly effective, mowing down anomalies like blades of grass. Using the gun to completely deplete the unstable cores converted them into something else.

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Item: [Genesis Reclamation Core] (transcendent rank, legendary)

*A magical vessel capable of reclaiming the energy of unseated reality cores (consumable, magic core).*

- **Effect:** Can drain the energy from unseated reality cores, as well as individuals and objects that have consumed that energy. When completely charged, this item will transmute into a [Regenesis Core].

---

Jason had no idea what a regenesis core was, but it seemed the reclamation cores could potentially drain the power from gold-rankers and ancient vampires, which represented a huge weapon against them. Jason resolved to use the minigun to create as many of them as he could.

With his increased arsenal and a lot of territory left to claim, Jason conducted his next domain expansion with a large excess of the required stable genesis cores. Each expansion had increased the affected area, but adding all those extra cores caused the expansion to blow out to an area five or six kilometres across.

The domain finally reached the limits of the city zone, which Jason estimated to be roughly the area covered by the dome in the real world. With so much expansion, Jason wouldn't be able to see what lay in the gloom beyond his new territory until he ventured out to the new border, but he had more important things to deal with. He sensed anomalies penetrating his domain from all around it and could immediately tell they were not like those that came before.

Given the distances involved, Jason commandeered one of the cars out on the street. He could have used his silver-rank speed to sprint around but the cars were just there, so he decided to use them. They were rather science-fiction looking cars, which he didn't

hate, but he had no keys. Seeing as it was part of his domain, he concentrated on controlling it and the door clicked open. It took longer to get the car to start but after a minute of prodding with his aura, the electric engine hummed to life.

The ride wasn't as smooth as Shade's car forms but it was still an easy journey out through the streets of Jason's expanded domain. He stopped the quiet car a few hundred metres short of where he sensed the closest anomaly and progressed on foot. Compared to the human-shaped anomalies of the last few expansions, Jason could already tell these were different.

Their auras were notably more powerful and there were far fewer of them, although fewer was relative. Jason's spirit domain was now somewhere between five and six kilometres across and he sensed anomalies cross the border at fairly even distances, all around. He estimated the number of anomalies somewhere north of a hundred and fifty.

Jason's first objective was to scout out the enemy, catch one before they started converging and test its strength. He moved carefully, observing its aura. It was moving swiftly, although not at the breakneck rush the rabid anomalies had. He was in a more suburban area of the city without so many tall buildings, one and two-storey homes with one-floor businesses peppered amongst them. He found one three-storey apartment complex and went inside, using the roof as a vantage.

What he spotted walking down the middle of the street looked like a werewolf, a hulking hybrid of man and beast that stood larger than either. It was bipedal, with long arms ending in brutal-looking claws. It would have stood some eight or nine feet tall if it hadn't been hunched forward.

Jason was about to move when the anomaly sniffed the air and looked right up at him.

"Crap."

He pulled the pistols in his hip and shoulder holster, immediately firing at the werewolf. He wasn't anticipating much but wanted to compare them to previous anomalies. It was already moving fast before the first shots went off, sprinting at the building. Its shambling gait wasn't wildly fast, but when it leapt at the wall and started climbing, its pace barely slowed. Strong claws digging right into the wall, the creature rushed up as Jason leaned over the side to rain down pistol blasts.

The pistols singed hair but didn't seem to impede the creature at all, which vaulted onto the flat roof as Jason scrambled back, dropping his pistols. He smoothly pulled the lightning gun from the magnetic clips on his back and fired.

Electricity blasted out of the arc rifle in a blinding flash, locking onto the werewolf anomaly like a tether. The creature was rocked back on its feet by the jolt of electricity but let out an angry growl as it pushed forward again. The air was filled with the stench of burning hair as the anomaly tried to push on with the electricity burning up its flesh, only to collapse on the rooftop.

The muscle paralysis effect of the lightning gun had kicked in, leaving the werewolf struggling to swipe its claws vainly in Jason's direction, even as its arms savagely cramped up. Jason continued holding down the trigger to pump electricity into it.

---

➤ [You have defeated \[Living Anomaly\].](#)

---

Jason slung the lightning gun on his back and picked up his dropped pistols before holstering them. The lightning gun had proved to be effective against the werewolf but it burned through far too much of Jason's mana for just one monster. He could potentially bank on the chaining effect to take on multiples at once, but the chains weren't reliable and there were still more than a hundred and fifty of the anomalies. He had some mana potions but nowhere near enough to fuel the lightning gun enough for that.

The solution would have to be the minigun, which was an acceptable outcome. It ran on cores rather than Jason's mana and he wanted to deplete some of those cores anyway, so he set out to hunt the monstrous anomalies with his giant gun.

The anomalies turned out to be all human-animal hybrids, mostly wolves and bears that fell quite easily to the minigun. Other proved much trickier, such as flying falcon hybrids that dodged the blasts of his unwieldy gun. Against them, Jason was forced to pull the lightning gun back out and burn through huge chunks of his mana.

This was a trend as Jason's powerful minigun made short work of the larger hybrids. More troublesome were the smaller, faster ones that were hard to pin down with the unwieldy weapon. The worst were the fox hybrids, who were only the size of children but still boasted strength at the low end of silver-rank. Their speed was closer to the high end, making them agile enough to avoid the heavy minigun.

Jason's response was to drop the gun and pull out his sword. The fox hybrids were fast but lacked the strength of the bear hybrids and the savage claws and teeth of the werewolves. This meant that Jason's armour held up relatively well to the fox hybrids but they were still strong and fast enough that many drew blood before Jason cut them down.

Eventually, Jason took all the anomalies down. Things got hairy at the end as they started converging and attacking in groups, but the minigun was a specialty tool for

handling clustered enemies. Only against a mixed group of five, including some devilishly elusive fox hybrids was Jason ever worried about the outcome.

When the last anomaly fell, nothing happened. Jason had roamed close enough to the edges of the city to see that his domain now encompassed all of it, with a gloom-filled forest beyond. He had been sure that this would complete his second full territory but he had no response from the system. This meant that either the territory expanded beyond the limits of the city or there were still anomalies remaining.

Just as he was considering the possibility of some stealth hybrid that had evaded his aura senses, something new came lumbering out of the gloom. Jason heard it first, a rumble of distant thunder, then another and another. Jason had seen enough monster movies to know giant footsteps when he heard them.

The aura came next, pushing into Jason's domain as if struggling to escape the gloom. It was like Jason's aura in that, despite being silver-rank, it possessed strength far above the norm. Even Jason's aura, for all its power, fell short of the sheer magnitude of what was emerging from the darkness beyond Jason's domain. A giant leg appeared first, taller than a house and darker than night. It looked to be made from the same void-stuff as Jason's cloak, but without stars to light up the black emptiness.

As it stepped out of the gloom, The creature's full, looming height was revealed to be the equal of Jason's towering pagoda. It was more than a kilometre away from Jason but he had no trouble spotting it, despite being a dark figure against a dark background. The size was a huge factor, but also it was limned in a silvery light that only highlighted how much of a void its body was. It made the entity look like a gateway to some dark dimension.

The shadow giant had the proportions of a tall, thin man, with long arms that hung down at its knees, dangling limply as it walked. It moved with a slow inexorability, turning in Jason's direction. While it looked slow, that was an illusion of size, with the vast length of its stride actually propelling it quite swiftly.

Jason moved himself to a place where he had a long line of sight on the monster, picking the grassy strip between where the city ended and the dark woods began. He pulled out the magic bazooka, having positioned himself hundreds of metres away. He had no interest in catching himself in the explosion again.

He dropped in an unstable core and fired it with the lumbering giant not even trying to dodge. It was struck dead centre, its torso and head immediately wiped out in a blast that still had enough force to whip violently at Jason's hair and clothes, even from so far away. Gobbets of something black, wet and stinking rained down from the sky, the core

explosion almost having evaporated the giant. Only its legs and its severed hands remained, all dropping to the ground. The legs toppled like felled trees, one of them crushing a house.

“That was surprisingly straightforward,” Jason said to himself.

- 
- You have defeated [Greater Anomaly].
  - You have overtaken a genesis space territory and purged all anomalous elements.
  - Completed territory is being remade.
  - Return to core territory to initiate transfiguration of new territory.
- 

Jason’s first territory had undergone a wild transformation after completely claiming it, going from dingy hotel to opulent pagoda. It sounded like his second territory would undergo a similar change and he had no interest in being in the middle of a city folding in on itself like origami or whatever ended up happening. First, though, he had to loot the giant.

“Boss monster,” he said as he wandered towards the closest toppled leg. “This is definitely a dungeon.”

He frowned as a thought occurred to him.

“It better not drop loot boxes full of crap cosmetics.”



## Chapter 419

### Open to the Unanticipated

Jason examined the loot from the Shadow Giant as it dissolved into rainbow smoke behind him. It was a dark sphere, just large enough to fit in one hand. It was cool and glassy to the touch.

---

Item: [Dark Orb] (unranked, uncommon)

*Contains the power to unseal the power of darkness. (consumable, awakening stone).*

- Requirements: Sealed [Dark Essence] ability.
- Effect: Unseals a random [Dark Essence] ability.
- You have 5 sealed dark essence abilities.
- Would you like to use [Dark Orb] Y/N?

---

“Yes.”

- 
- Ability [Shadow of the Reaper] has been unsealed.
- 

The orb melted into Jason’s hand in a sensation reminiscent of when he had absorbed awakening stones in the early days of his magical life. As the orb was fully absorbed, Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“Mr Asano.”

“Shade!”

Jason enfolded his familiar in a hug.

“Ooh, you’re quite squishy. It’s nice.”

“This is rather awkward.”

“It’s great to have a friend here, Shade. I’ve been talking to myself a lot and what company I have had has been far from ideal.”

“We have been observing. Colin and Gordon are eager to help and unsealing either would have been more effective than me. While it is good to be liberated, you would be better served by a more combat-oriented companion.”

“Don’t underestimate the value of having someone to talk to. You know I don’t always make the best choices when left alone.”

“Quite.”

"You could have argued a little. Still, maybe the others will be next. There'll be more boss monsters that drop these orbs, right?"

"It seems likely," Shade said. "We can reliably assert that the anomalies attacking your spirit domain are, at least in part, a direct reaction to your presence here."

"Do you think it's some kind of test left behind by the original Builder? Or part of some safety mechanism in case something went wrong with his experiment."

"I would not have the temerity to speak to the mind of a great astral being, particularly one who diverged from its intrinsic purpose. Some idiosyncrasies are to be expected from the new Builder, with its mortal origins, but for the original great astral beings, their purpose is their nature. What would divert them from that is beyond my understanding."

"Maybe he got dumped."

"That seems unlikely."

\*\*\*

Jason and Shade stood on the top floor balcony and looked out over the city.

---

➤ **Initiate transfiguration of new territory Y/N?**

---

The transformation of Jason's second territory was very different from his first. In the dark sky, the constellations set out like magic circles started to shift. Moving to form a grand circle centred above the pagoda. Then, in the middle of the vast circle of stars, a tiny but blindingly bright light sparked into being before flaring out to take the form of a sun, shining in the dark and bringing daylight to the domain for the first time. A cerulean sky started expanding out to displace the dark of night.

A column of glorious sunlight beamed down on the pagoda, then slowly expanded out to touch every part of the city, Wherever it reached, gold, silver and blue mist came steam up, as if the light were burning away its impurities, obscuring Jason's view.

As the mist cleared, it revealed the transformed city. Previously, when he had claimed it for his domain, it had taken on the colours of Jason's cloud house. Now, as he completed the process of incorporating it into his spirit domain, it wasn't just the colours but the very materials of the cloud house that could be seen spreading out before him. The streets were dark crystal and the footpaths were light stone tiles, but the buildings were all constructed from clouds, like some make-believe kingdom. Gardens and greenery were more prevalent than ever, from planters lining the streets to traffic islands lined with trees and roundabouts containing flowering gardens.

In the sky above, the sunlight-filled blue sky extended as far as the great circle of stars, at which point the previous void of night continued to surround it. Only Jason's domain stood in the light, while the night's gloom continued to hold sway in the regions around it.

Jason and Shade observed the city made of cloud-stuff.

"It can't stay this way if I manage to solve this thing and the transformation zone's dome comes down, can it?" Jason asked.

"We are meddling with the building blocks of reality," Shade said. "Anything is possible."

"It seems odd, though. What I'm trying to do boils down to resolving the incongruity between the world's reality and the astral space reality after the transformation zone mashed them together. How is a magical fairy town not wildly incongruous? It looks like a children's book, or a mobile app hiding its predatory business model behind adorable graphic design."

"Perhaps this is the middle ground," Shade suggested. "You are creating a bridge between the mundane and the magical. Like any bridge, it must cross between them and be anchored on both sides."

"I guess we'll find out, sooner or later."

- 
- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
  - Territory has been renamed [Soul Haven].
  
  - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 38.6%.
  
  - Evolution of ability [Spirit Vault] is tied to the transformation zone. If the transformation zone is stabilised before the ability completes its evolution, the evolution will fail.
  
  - 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?
-

Jason had ostensibly achieved his objective and discussed with Shade the ramifications of stabilising the transformation zone. They immediately agreed that Jason should push on, reducing the impact of doing so as much as possible. The dimensional stability of the world was at the breaking point, so they needed to minimise the damage as much as they could. Jason could live without the ability evolution, but with how much the degree of evolution had jumped with his second territory, he likely wouldn't have to.

Soon Jason was driving through the transformed streets in one of Shade's car forms. The road surfaces were still dark crystal, now in flagstone-style bricks. The cars were gone from the streets and most of the storefronts were now empty. On spotting one that wasn't, Jason excitedly called for Shade to stop, leaping out while the car was still in motion. Jason dashed up to the door, holding himself back from smashing through the glass as he waited the second it took for the door to slide open. He rushed inside and madly searched, only to let out a cry of anguish as he found a small shelf label.

"Mr Asano," Shade said his voice uncharacteristically soft as he emerged from Jason's shadow. "Sometimes in life, we all suffer setbacks. It is how we respond to them that helps us grow."

Jason yanked the label from the shelf and threw it bitterly to the ground before storming out, leaving Shade behind.

"Of course," Shade said to the empty room, "some of us have more growing to do than others."

He picked up the label and returned it to its place.

CRYSTAL WASH OUT OF STOCK – THANK YOU FOR VISITING JORY'S FRIENDLY LOCAL PHARMACY.

\*\*\*

Most of Shade's utility came from facilitating other powers of Jason's, with his only direct attack being a mana drain. With the rest of Jason's abilities still sealed, what Shade could do was serve as a distraction and help Jason with stealth, masking his heat and scent. These both proved useful when Jason expanded his domain into the thick woodlands surrounding the city.

The responding anomalies were more hybrids, stronger than those that had come before. With the tight confines and poor sightlines of the forest, the huge and heavy minigun was more hindrance than help, forcing Jason to turn to his sword. With Shade distracting the hybrids and confounding their senses, Jason was able to stage ambushes and manage their greater strength, expanding his domain twice more to claim the entire forest territory.

The boss monster this time was not something he could just blast away with the core launcher. It was a single hybrid, no larger than the others, but with the speed of a fox hybrid and the strength of a bear hybrid. Jason fought it amongst the trees, a contest of agility, speed and skill that left him a bloody wreck by the time the creature fell.

- 
- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
  - Territory has been renamed [Tranquil Shadow Woods].
  
  - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 84.7%.
  
  - Evolution of ability [Spirit Vault] is tied to the transformation zone. If the transformation zone is stabilised before the ability completes its evolution, the evolution will fail.
  
  - 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. Current severity reduction: 13.7%
  
  - Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?

---

Jason looted another power-unlocking orb from the boss, this time a sin orb. It served as further confirmation that the transformation space was reacting specifically to him. He got lucky with the unlocked power, which was one of his special attacks, Punish.

Punish was one of the few powers Jason had that could synergise with itself by inflicting necrotic damage while also applying the stacking sin affliction, which increased all subsequent necrotic damage. It was an ability representative of Jason's earliest days as an adventurer when his power set was built around low but exponentially growing damage.

\*\*\*

The gloom-filled forest was replaced by woodlands where sunlight dappled through the canopy to create a magical twilight. Jason sat slumped up against a tree.

"You should rest," Shade told him.

"I am resting."

"Proper rest. Return to the pagoda and sleep."

"We have no idea when this whole place will collapse in on itself. We may not have that kind of time."

"This amalgamation of a transformation zone and a proto-space has already been in place longer than any previously recorded instance of either. It is showing no signs of instability. You have been awake for around sixty hours, discounting the time you spent unconscious, which was hardly restful slumber. Even essence users need sleep."

"I'm barely an essence user, right now."

"Mr Asano, you have already accomplished your basic goal. If you strive for more without rest you may fail and lose everything. If you rest and the zone shows signs of breaking down, I will wake you and you can stabilise the zone."

Jason opened his mouth to respond but all that came out was a yawn.

"Fine," he conceded, pushing himself to his feet. He condensed the mist from his cloud flask to form a floating bed and fell into it.

"Yeah," he said happily. "That's the stuff."

"Why were you on the ground, leaning against a tree, instead of using that already?" Shade asked.

"Because I'd fall asleep. This is super comfy."

\*\*\*

Jason's domain expanded once more. As with previous territories, it transitioned unnaturally into a new biome at the territory's edge. In this case, the transition was to green, rolling hills washed by a chill wind. It was pastoral land, with patchwork fields, scattered barns and farmhouses visible in the distance. Jason's senses were alert for the appearance of the anomalies, but what he sensed first gravely startled him.

"Shade!"

Shade transformed into a black horse with a white mane and leapt into a sprint the moment Jason leapt atop him. Turf flew up under his hooves as he quickly reached speeds a racing bike would have trouble matching.

"I didn't think this would happen," Jason yelled over the rush of air. "I figured if I was going to find them, it would have happened by now. We've expanded way beyond the original area of the transformation zone."

"I believe that, in this place, we must always be open to the unanticipated," Shade said.

"I fought a bunch of spacemen with ray guns, so you won't get any argument from me."

Jason felt the first anomalies cross the border into his domain as he arrived at a farmhouse, leapt off his horse and threw open the door. Rushing through the building to the auras he sensed, he found a group of people standing around, looking at each other in

confusion. Each had pale skin and brassy, metallic hair matched perfectly by the colour of their eyes, marking them as not humans but celestines. They all turned as Jason burst in.

“Come with me if you want to live.”

## 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.

- 
- **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%**
- 

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."

## Chapter 421

### No Perfect Options

Jason was resting up before moving to claim one final territory. He was not far from the house containing the family he had rescued but he was giving them space to come to grips with their extraordinary circumstances. He was in the backyard of a nearby house, reclining in a cloud chair. The sky was a clear blue circle over his territory, encapsulated in a ring of endless night.

“There is something of a resemblance to your personal crest,” Shade observed.

“It kind of does,” Jason said, holding a hand out, palm up. An image of the crest tattooed on his back appeared over it. It was a night sky filled with stars and shadowy, indistinct figures, surrounding an empty cloak. Within the cloak was a bright, daylight sky.

As essence users entered the higher ranks, they reached the point of affecting the world around them outside of their essence powers. At silver-rank, this was mostly just a power to levitate that helped their increasingly heavy bodies walk on weaker surfaces or even water, but it was easily disrupted. Relying on it in combat or to arrest a high fall was ill-advised.

Those silver-rankers with a magically-induced personal crest could also project it, which had even less practical purpose. It did not obviate the need for the simple ritual that tested the crest against existing records for identification purposes.

Jason closed his hand and the image vanished.

“I should get to it, I guess,” he said. “I’m worried about what will happen. Maybe I should open it up and get some gold-rankers in here. Maybe they could do more.”

“Or perhaps the corresponding increase in response from the transformation zone would bring disaster,” Shade countered. “It would match their power, escalating the threat without tipping the balance in your favour.”

“I know. I’m just second-guessing myself.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“I’m not so certain. The price of my failure here is higher than ever and I’ve made mistakes before.”

“You’re adventurer, Mr Asano. Get up and go do your damn job.”

Jason sat up, giving his shadow a surprised look.

“That’s not like you, Shade.”

“It’s what you needed to hear, Mr Asano. Left to your own devices, you tend to flounder. You lose direction, becoming uncertain and second-guessing yourself. I do my best but I am glad Miss Farrah was sent to help.”

“Yeah, I owe your dad for that one.”

Jason got to his feet and the cloud chair dissolved into mist, which seemed to be drifting down his body to gather around his feet, like a fog-based water feature.

“I should talk to the family about leaving first. Give them time to prepare themselves for what happens next.”

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“Are your underpants on fire?” Nikoleta asked as she met him in the front yard of the house her family was staying in.

“No,” Jason said and the mist shroud he hadn’t bothered to dismiss was drawn to the miniaturised flask hanging from his neck chain. “We should talk.”

“It would be best if it were just you and I again,” Nikoleta said. “My grandparents are very religious and they’ve seen and heard things about you that make them wary.”

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “Shall we walk?”

They set off along the street, down a footpath of lightly-coloured tiles.

“What happened to your eyes?” she asked.

“Um, I don’t know. Shade?”

“Your eyes have changed again with your gift evolution,” Shade said from Jason’s shadow. Nikoleta looked around a little nervously at the voice.

“I quite liked the silver,” Jason said. “What is it now?”

“A shifting mix of gold, silver and blue. It is reminiscent of your transcendent damage abilities.”

“Shifting?” he asked.

“The colours are in a constant state of change,” Shade said. “Also, the structure of your eye had changed. You no longer have irises or pupils. They are just coloured orbs, now.”

That wasn’t hugely startling, given that the eyes of essence users were one of the first aspects of their bodies to move past human limitations. As a result, eyes were the most common part of the body on essence users to undergo visible physiological changes.

“Does it look cool?” Jason asked.

“I think it would be better if they were black,” Shade said.

“Look who I’m asking. Nikoleta, what do you think?”

They shared a look as she examined his face.



“It makes you look a bit... inhuman,” she said, then self-consciously touched her face next to her own eyes. “Not that I can say anything.”

All of her family now had eyes and hair in a uniform shade of metallic brass, although the texture of their hair felt normal.

“I’m sorry,” Jason said softly. “With the life I lead, it’s easy to overlook how overwhelming all this is when you first come to it. You have many strange things to come to terms with and it’s only been a day. Did you sleep?”

Nikoleta nodded.

“After the initial shock wore off, we all became very exhausted. And those beds are so comfortable.”

“Yeah,” Jason said with a chuckle. “They’re nice.”

He gave her a comforting smile.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but I’m afraid your family’s ordeal isn’t done quite yet. I’m going to go off and claim another area of territory, see if I can’t find any more people like your family. Then I’m going to bring all this to an end and take us out of here.”

“What happens then?” she asked.

“I honestly don’t know,” Jason admitted. “As far as I know, what’s going on here has never happened before. I’m just doing my best to save the world without breaking anything it can’t do without. Right now, we’re inside a giant dome, despite the sky above and all the land stretching out around us. My best guess is that when the dome comes down, this little city, town or whatever it is will stick around and the rest will go.”

“What will happen to us?”

“You see that tower?” Jason said, pointing to the pagoda, the top of which could be seen over the three and four-floor story buildings in the centre of the city. “We’re all going to be safe in there.”

He managed to avoid adding the word ‘probably.’

“I don’t think your farm will be back but that’s far from the extent of your problems. Your family is a part of a unique magical event, which means that a lot of people with power will want to study you.”

“Study?”

“Yeah. Best case scenario, they lock you up in a room somewhere and run every test known to science. Then a few that aren’t.”

“And the worst case?” she asked.

“It’s probably best if we just focus on avoiding that.”

“How?”

“People trying to grab me is pretty much the default position, so I was already going to do a runner. Now, we just all scarper together. Assuming you want to. If you want to take your chances with whoever is out there, I can send you out of this place before I do anything.”

“What about after we run?”

“There’s a couple of options. One is the place my family lives in Australia. Unless very serious people take a very serious run at it, you’ll be safe there. It would be better if we could have you disappear into the population somewhere, but the changes you’ve gone through are hard to hide. The alternative would be to sneak you into a more ordinary transformation zone, one in a populated area. The Network is taking all those people in, so you could mix into the crowd. If you got found out, though, you’d already be in the hands of people you maybe don’t want to be.”

Nikoleta didn’t respond after he finished, staring thoughtfully at the ground as they walked.

“There are no perfect options, I’m sorry.”

“You have already helped us. We are not your responsibility.”

“Yes, you are,” Jason said. “When I was in a situation not that different from yours, I made the choice to be an adventurer. I don’t know how that translates into Slovak but it means that when there’s some crazy-dangerous magic and some innocent people, my job is standing in between it and them.”

“You’re speaking Slovak right now,” Nikoleta pointed out.

“I know, right? I have to practise to keep a handle on the whole translation thing. I was talking to this guy who was looking at me like he had no idea what he was saying. Turns out I got set off by his Kanji wrist tattoo and I was talking to him in Japanese. Which he didn’t speak. He was just kind of a tool bag.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

\*\*\*

Jason left Nikoleta to discuss things with her family and headed out for the next territory. Shade’s helicopter form landed close to the border of Jason’s spirit domain and he looked out into the gloom beyond. It looked like another cityscape, but even from just the darkened silhouettes, he could tell it was quite unlike the one he had already claimed.

He crossed the border and moved into the dark territory. He couldn’t see far but two things became quickly apparent. One was that the city seemed very industrial in design, not just in the metal and concrete construction but the design aesthetic. Metal plates and heavy bolts; he half expected to see a giant steam piston.

The other aspect immediately apparent was that the city was long abandoned. Decades of corrosion and weathering had left the concrete pocked and crumbling, the asphalt potholed and every building a rusted husk.

“Find anything?” Jason asked. Shade had been spreading out his bodies to search the border areas as Jason explored at a measured and cautious pace.

“Nothing more than you,” Shade reported, “but I believe I know the world that this territory was based upon.”

“Seriously? The original Builder based Earth and Pallimustus on already extant worlds but that was the better part of thirteen billion years ago. I know you’re old but not that old, right? Any planet would be massively changed in that time.”

“I know it because it was one of the first worlds the new Builder plundered. It was a dead planet, so the other great astral beings allowed the Builder to break it apart and take what he wanted as part of the pacts by which they moderate one another. The Builder came to regret the concessions it made to the World-Phoenix for this, which is why it has become more circumspect. Now it plucks sufficiently stable astral spaces off the side of reality rather than trying to dig inside a reality and dismember worlds entirely.”

“He used to strip whole worlds?”

“Only dead ones, which turned out to be a poor beginning for his ambitions. When he used parts of dead worlds as the basis for the one he was constructing, it was like implanting dead flesh into living. There was a taint of death, pervading even the magic, forcing the Builder to seal away those parts of his constructed world.”

“Sealed away how?”

“Sealed in time. Not locked away but frozen and unchanging. Anything altered by external influence simply reverts to the state it was at the moment the seal was put in place. A perfect quarantine.”

“I knew time manipulation was possible,” Jason said. “Danielle Geller’s confluence essence is time, but her scope is very limited, even at silver rank. If she gets to diamond, will she be able to time travel?”

“Only forwards,” Shade said. “Time can be sped up or slowed down. One can move forward, vanishing and then reappearing at some point in the future. Affecting the past, however, is impossible. Even the Keeper of Moments, the great astral being that governs time, cannot do such a thing.”

“Well, you say that, but your dad is the ferryman of the dead and he’s not above occasionally sending someone back.”

“It is not so for the Keeper. The past is inviolate.”

“Probably what he told you,” Jason muttered.

“Getting back to the matter at hand,” Shade said pointedly, “I believe it likely that the enemies in this place will consist of constructed life. A variation of undead that, like vampires, use life-force injected into the unliving to create a facsimile of life.”

Most undead were simply corpses turned into a mockery of life by death energy, while vampires used stolen life force to largely replicate the function of a living creature.

“Are we talking some kind of artificial vampire?” Jason asked. “How would an artificial vampire work? Like cloning?”

“I don’t believe it will be vampire variants. I do know that what you call magitech on your world was quite advanced in this one, but my knowledge only goes so far. I was not in the Builder’s constructed reality for an extended time.”

“You’ve been there?”

“I have. As you know, I have been a familiar several times. One of my summoners sought out knowledge from a universe that had reached its end long ago. The only place the knowledge potentially remained was in fragments of the universe taken from it by the Builder quarantined in time.”

“Must have been really important information,” Jason said. “Like a really good sausage recipe.”

“No,” Shade said. “It was not a really good sausage recipe.”

“Oh, wow,” Jason said. “A really, really good sausage recipe. Nice.”

“I believe this conversation has officially scraped the bottom of the barrel,” Shade said. “Perhaps it is time to start expanding your domain.”

“Yeah,” Jason said unhappily. He was worried about the outcome of his final territory claim, given that he didn’t want to risk using his most powerful weapon again. The core launcher had become noticeably warped when fighting the boss of the last territory. He was not willing to risk it blowing up in his hands unless he had no other option.

Returning to the border of his domain, Jason claimed the first stretch of the next territory. As a precaution, he started by using the minimum number of stable genesis cores to claim the minimal area.

As his territory expanded outwards to reveal the broken city, Jason smacked his lips thoughtfully.

“Do you still have that sausage recipe?” he asked.

“It was not a sausage recipe.”

“I could go a good meal right now. I mean, that fruit you picked was nice but I’d rather enjoy taking a sausage in the mouth.”

“Please don’t be juvenile, Mr Asano.”

“You think it’s beneath me to say?”

“No, Mr Asano. It is beneath me to listen.”

## Chapter 422

### Stillness

Jason kicked the zombie cyborg in the chest and it stumbled back off the edge of the roof, falling to the concrete below.

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➤ You have defeated [Unliving Anomaly].

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“I don’t like this place,” Jason said. “It’s too bloody grimdark.”

Somehow, having the gloom retract from the industrial ruins left it bleaker than when it was shrouded in darkness. Jason could now see across a cityscape of crumbling smokestacks and buildings more rust than iron. The sky, unlike the clear blue of his completed territories, was hidden behind ominous amber clouds that cast a pall over the city. The air was too hot, heavy with a stench of smoke and oil, despite the city’s industries being decades past operation.

The anomalies that came for Jason were universally unpleasant. Most common were the corpses animated through macabre cybernetics. Rather than sleek, cyberpunk prosthetics, these were crude iron, bolted directly into flesh. These anomalies were slow and clumsy but numerous and hard to kill. Jason mostly relied on his necrotic special attack to resume the decomposition of their corpse components, arrested by whatever process had turned them into their current state.

With each cluster of the zomborgs, as Jason thought of them, there was usually one or more of another anomaly type. Larger, faster and more dangerous, they were a kind of Frankenstein's monster if Frankenstein's corpse supplier had been significantly less reliable. Collections of mismatched body parts stitched roughly together, they stood anywhere from six and a half to eight feet tall. They showed signs of the same kind of industrial-age cybernetics as the zomborgs, augmented with glass pipes pumping a sickly yellow liquid around their bodies.

These anomalies, which Jason had dubbed ‘bad franks,’ were as strong as they looked but also fast, despite their clumsy appearance. They were also smarter than the mindless zomborgs, although that wasn’t saying much. It just meant it was harder to bait them into walking off buildings or falling into holes.

Jason didn’t use any of his guns to fight the anomalies. He’d tried the lightning gun but it had little impact on the zomborgs and none at all on the bad franks. The minigun he kept in reserve as it was his best tool for whatever boss monster came out at the end.

Groaning metal from below warned of more enemies making their way up through one of the city's least-degraded buildings, which was still an edifice of dilapidation. The steel rooftop looked like it was covered in red dirt from all the rust power under Jason's boots.

Jason had already been tracking them on his tactical map and as they drew close to the building, he waited with his sword in hand. The largely intact rooftop was a good place to fight because the open space allowed for mobility and the powerful-but-stupid enemies could be lured into the places where it had collapsed. If he was lucky and had softened them up first, sometimes the fall even killed them instead of just forcing them to climb back up the stairs.

Their numbers might have been a problem in an open space except for the power he unlocked after defeating the boss of the previous territory. The giant troll had dropped a blood orb that unsealed one of Jason's blood essence powers.

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#### Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain, boon).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Silver 2 (31%).
  
- Effect (iron): Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.
  
- Effect (bronze): Affects any number of bodies in a wide area.
  
- Effect (Silver): Gain an instance of [Blood Frenzy] for each corpse drained, up to a threshold determined by current rank. After reaching the threshold, gain instances of [Blood of the Immortal] instead.
  
- [Blood Frenzy] (boon, unholy, stacking): Bonus to [Speed] and [Recovery]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.
  
- [Blood of the Immortal] (boon, healing, unholy, stacking): On suffering damage, an instance is consumed to grant a powerful but short-lived heal-over-time effect. Additional instances can be accumulated but do not have a cumulative effect.

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The zomborgs weren't subject to the effect of the spell but the bad franks were. Each time he used it both his body and his healing rate accelerated, and so long as he periodically killed and drained a new bad frank, the buffs kept getting refreshed. By the time blood frenzy stacked up to its maximum effect, Jason's speed and healing reached

the peak of silver. It wasn't a match for even a low-rank gold, but it was enough to be competitive. It wasn't strictly needed against the franks and the zomborgs but when the time came to face ancient vampires, it would be critical.

The zomborgs were a minimal threat, although a tenacious one with their ability to soak damage. Jason moved like a flash, staying out of their reach while his necrotic special attack rotted them away until they were just piles of bones and metal. As for the bad franks, they had strength and fortitude, but no skill. Once Jason matched and then eclipsed their speed, he quickly ran rings around them. They also had exploitable weak points, like the exposed pipes pumping fluid around their bodies.

If he was fighting them one-on-one it would have been easy, but his individual superiority was thoroughly tempered by their numbers. If it wasn't for Shade providing distractions and alternate targets for the dim-witted enemies, he would have been overwhelmed, however fast he moved.

Jason's biggest weakness was his inability to quickly deliver large amounts of damage and he struggled to clear out each cluster of anomalies before the next set found him. He felt like he was back at the beginning, after first arriving in the transformation zone. Fights were desperate struggles with weapons that were not quite good enough, and while he had some powers now, the enemies had grown far more dangerous.

Jason wasn't even sure how many days he'd been in the transformation zone, but in that time, much of the fat had been trimmed from his swordsmanship. On Earth, he'd found moments of desperation but he'd lost some of the grow-or-die sensibility that pervaded the other world. He'd only really felt it in moments, like the monster wave in Broken Hill and the gold-rank proto-space in Makassar. Now he had that feeling again, the transformation zone forcing him to fight differently, forcing him to grow in ways outside of his usual patterns. The price of failure was unconscionable.

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Jason emerged from the building with his armour in tatters and painted in his own blood. The wounds that produced it were long-healed and the ichor of the monsters had gone up in rainbow smoke, but his armour was so damaged that the self-repair function was impaired. He stopped to rest, even though it meant his stacks of blood frenzy dropping off. He could have all the stamina recovery in the world but some kinds of exhaustion went soul deep. Leaning heavily against a half-collapsed wall, he wiped down his sword with a rag and slid it back into its scabbard.

Tired and sore, Jason felt weary down to the skeleton that probably wasn't made of bone anymore. He could sense more of the anomalies but none were moving in his



direction for the moment, giving him room to rest and think. Something about the rooftop fight had felt wrong and it wasn't just his lack of powers. His mind played over the fight he had just been through as the anomalies came at him in waves. He'd let himself grow frantic, too concerned with the capabilities lost to him to properly make use of the ones he had.

He needed to go back to basics. To use what he had instead of lamenting what he didn't. He thought about the early days and his training with Rufus, Gary and Farrah. For all their constant drilling, they never focused on his essence powers, leaving them to Jason to understand for himself. What they had taught him were the universal aspects true to every adventurer. Whatever an adventurer's powers might be, their greatest weapon was mindset.

"Thank you," he murmured, pushing himself off the wall.

"Mr Asano?" Shade asked.

"I'm going to stop for a little while," Jason said.

"Very well, Mr Asano."

Jason went back into the building and climbed the metal stairs that groaned with every step. He moved to the middle of the roof and sat down to meditate, floating just above the powered rust coating the rooftop.

Extending his senses as he stilled his mind, Jason felt the magic inside and around him. Starting with himself, he calmed the flow of magic in his body, guiding it to the optimal path. Then he moved his senses to the magic around him.

The ambient magic was much stronger than anything he had encountered on Earth, or even in Greenstone in the other world. Only proto and astral spaces, with their connection to the astral, had the kind of magical richness of the transformation zone. This part of the zone felt inert and tainted, however. The death and decay of the city had permeated the magic itself.

As it flowed in and out of his body like breath, he filtered and refined it, using his body as a distillery. The unwelcome aspects were purged while the purified magic was absorbed, circulated and let go. Slowly but surely, a tiny but noticeable area, barely beyond Jason's skin, became a shroud of untainted magic.

Letting his spirit go where it willed in the mindlessness of meditation, Jason's aura took root in that thin shroud, seeking to influence the world around it. As it did, the very reality around him flinched, crushing in on Jason in a brutal magical backlash.

Wrenched from his trance, Jason poured every scrap of strength in his soul into his aura as he fell to the roof, clutching his head and screaming. His aura pushed back

against the power crushing in on him but it was an umbrella against a tidal wave. A hurricane of power was trying to rip the soul right out of his body and kill him, and all he could do was try and endure.

A torment unlike anything he had felt since his soul battle with the Builder scoured at his spirit, trying to make him let go and die. Jason went into a mindless state, not from meditation but from the insensibility of a pain that went far beyond the physical. At the point he felt his grip slipping, about to let go, Jason felt the support of his familiars from within his soul. Like warm hands at his back, they helped him hold on even as he lost track of time.

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Jason regained consciousness sprawled on the rooftop, with no concept of how long had passed.

- 
- You have forcibly unsealed aura ability [Hegemony].

New Title: [Reality Hegemon]

- ??? - You have awakened potential your soul cannot sustain at its current rank.
- The maximum total size of your spirit domains has increased.
- The effect of your spirit domain on hostile intruders ignores rank disparity.

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Jason felt like his insides had been scooped out, tossed in a blender with a bunch of chillies and then poured back in. He closed the window, sensing anomalies converging on his position. Whatever just happened, it had gained the notice of every anomaly across the section of the city he had claimed for his domain. He could sense them all moving towards him in a beeline.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said, a rare strain of concern colouring his usually stoic inflection.

“I’ll be fine,” Jason croaked, pushing himself into a sitting position. He floated slightly off the rooftop, stilling his mind once more. He slowly brought the chaotic flow of magic in his body back into line, reordering the flow. It was filled with the taint of the surrounding magic and he began filtering it out. He kept his mind calm, in spite of the anomalies he sensed reaching the building.

“Mr Asano...”

“I know.”

Jason continued to rectify his condition, even as he felt the fast-moving bad franks race up the stairs.

“Mr Asano!”

The first bad frank burst through a doorway already smashed out by previous attackers. Shade had spread bodies out to distract the anomalies pouring up the building in numbers that threatened to collapse the stairs. Shade couldn't hurt the anomalies, but neither could they hurt him, their strikes passing harmlessly through his incorporeal form.

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➤ [Unliving Anomaly] has attacked ally [Shade]. Ability [Hegemony] has inflicted [Sin] on [Unliving anomaly].

---

As more bad franks and some zomborgs reached the rooftop, even the dozens of Shades were not enough to keep the anomalies distracted. A bad frank thundered towards Jason, still floating just above the rooftop in a meditative pose. The anomaly dropped an arm like the trunk of a falling tree but missed as Jason dropped to the roof, rolling out of the way and to his feet as his sword snaked out of its scabbard. The blade severed a fluid pipe in the monstrosity's arm and cut into its flesh.

Having already stacked up some of the sin affliction from Jason's awakened aura power, the necrosis from his special attack rotted away the flesh around the wound. It turned into a wet mess like charcoal mixed into custard, sliding from the anomaly's arm to spatter on the ground. The creature took another swing but Jason was already moving.

Jason's unexpected ordeal hadn't made him any faster or stronger. It hadn't caused a sudden qualitative leap in his sword technique. Yet he felt like a different person as he moved amongst the enemy, his mind a leaf floating on a still, deep pond. He did not have the speed boost from bloody frenzy yet he somehow felt faster than ever, his thoughts calm even as his body moved like water, flowing and smooth yet torrential and rapid.

He focused on the first bad frank and it went down. Even while continuing to avoid attacks he cast a spell, draining its life force and giving himself his first stack of blood frenzy.

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Even with his new state of mind, Jason was far from invincible. Once more he leaned against the outside of the building, painted in a fresh coat of his own blood. He was practically naked, his armour reduced to little more than decorative ribbons.

He looked at his hands, rubbing his fingers together, feeling the sensation of it.

“I feel different,” he said.

“You are different, Mr Asano. Before you and I ever met, Mr Remore and Miss Hurin set you on a path towards a certain state of mind. It exists somewhere between concentration and meditation; a paradoxically simultaneous state of empty mind and full attentiveness. It is a state that only essence users, who have surpassed the limitation of the physical brain can enter, although many never do. It has many names; in Miss Hurin’s world it is called the battle trance.”

“Rufus and Farrah never told me about this.”

“No. They set you on the path and let you walk it.”

The more Jason grew stronger, the more he came to understand how many unspoken things Rufus and Farrah had embedded into the training they spent months pouring into him, hour after hour, day after day.

“Rufus and Farrah can do this?”

“Yes. I suspect Mr Remore may be better at it but you have seen Miss Hurin use it yourself. You have observed yourself how she lacks your mobility, yet finds her way to where she needs to be, precisely when she needs to be there. This is how.”

"Dawn fought Akari," Jason said, remembering how Dawn and her normal-ranked body inexplicably out-spurred the silver-ranked swordswoman. "That never made sense. It was weird, as if the whole thing was choreographed or Akari was hypnotised or something."

“Yes. That was a diamond-ranker taking the effect to its absolute extreme. I suggest, now that you have touched on that state, that you discuss it with the two women on returning to them.”

“Assuming I get out of this place intact,” Jason said. “I still have to claim the rest of this territory.”

## Chapter 423

### Whatever We Face

Jason continued to extend his spirit domain over the industrial wasteland city, seeking to master the battle trance as he fought hordes of anomalies. Although he had touched upon the trance once, it was not a state that he easily found his way into. In some fights, he managed it and others not.

"My understanding of the state is limited, having never experienced it for myself," Shade said. "From what I do understand, forcibly trying to push your way into it will have little to no success. One of my previous summoners who could use the battle trance described it as finding the balance to stand on the surface of a pond and then letting herself sink into it."

Due to the nature of the transformation zone, the industrial city was a strange shape, existing in a ring around Jason's existing domain. Each time he expanded his domain further into it, he made his way around, dealing with the anomalies. It was grim work in a bleak environment with unpleasant enemies but he slogged through, increasingly eager to leave.

When he claimed the final stretch of the city and cleared out the last of the anomalies, he sensed the boss make its appearance. After it was revealed to his aura senses, Jason went to scout it out. It was large, three metres tall and almost as wide. A hideously overdone version of the bad franks, it was a pile of mismatched, sick and fatty flesh, roughly stitched together. Only the crude iron exoskeleton bolted directly into the flesh held the blubbery mound in place.

It had faces on both sides of its flabby head and three thick, stubby legs holding it up like a tripod. It was not an elegant design, forcing the awkward creature to lumber slowly around. The arms, of which it had four, were the only part of it not sagging with fat. Far too long for its body, they were made of hard, toned muscle.

Held in its oversized arms were a pair of heavy gatling guns that looked quite similar to Jason's, although there were some important differences. Instead of a hopper at the top to seat an unstable genesis core, these were fed heavy bullets from a belt that ran out of the abomination's body, through the gun and then back into the anomaly.

"Is it some kind of freaky bullet golem? It's a shame I can't risk using the core launcher because that thing is not zippy."

"The arms seem much more flexible," Shade observed. "You should not underestimate its ability to manoeuvre those guns in your direction."

"It'll do a better job than me at least," Jason agreed. "My minigun weighs about as much as an economy hatchback."

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully as they watched the boss anomaly shamle awkwardly down the street.

"You know," he said, "I can't use the core launcher."

"Yes," Shade said.

"The thing is, though, I'm not the only one here."

"Oh dear," Shade said.

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Jason sprinted through the building as bullets tore into it, ripping through the steel wall to chase him as the anomaly walked its gun after him, spitting flame from the rotating barrels as the bullets streamed out. When he came to a hole in the floor he didn't avoid it or leap over but instead dropped straight down to the floor below. The line of bullets continued to trail him, dropping down and following as he turned and ran back in the direction he had come from.

Jason had found that while the abomination was oblivious to him up to a certain range. The moment he crossed that threshold, the anomaly's eyes locked onto him. Even through walls its gaze never wavered, as it immediately swung one of its guns on him.

Jason had been ready and opened up with his own minigun, managing to destroy one of the monstrosity's guns before it fired. As it turned the other on him, though, Jason's minigun seized up. The tremendous forces that had pumped through it as Jason used it to kill hundreds, if not thousands of anomalies finally took it past its limits.

Jason was forced to drop the weapon and run as bullets started screaming through the air, punching through everything in their path. Shade's ability to hide Jason from abnormal senses could likely have shielded him from the abomination's power to see through walls but that would defeat the point of playing decoy.

A dark shape dashed from the shadows of a building to approach the boss anomaly. Shade took the core launcher from his personal storage space. Although it was much lighter than the minigun, it still pushed the limits of what Shade could lift with his limited ability to impart physical force.

Shade dropped in an unstable genesis core and fired and, as Jason had anticipated, the launcher malfunctioned. It operated by agitating an unstable core, then wrapping it in a short-lived containment field and launching it. The containment field failed to activate and the weapon exploded on the spot, annihilating Shade's body and sprinkling the abomination across the city.

- 
- You have defeated [Greater Anomaly].
  - You have overtaken a genesis space territory and purged all anomalous elements.
  - Return to core territory to initiate transfiguration of new territory.
- 

“That was unpleasant,” Shade said, another of his bodies emerging from Jason’s shadow. “Being torn apart by firmamental cosmic forces is not something I’d care to repeat.”

“Sorry about that,” Jason said as he clambered out through a hole in the bullet-riddled building. “Any lingering damage?”

“No,” Shade said. “You can reconstitute the lost shadow body with mana as usual.”

Jason found a gobbet of the boss anomaly and looted it, wisps of rainbow smoke appearing across the city where the remnants of the abomination were spread.

- 
- 100 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 1000 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 10000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  
  - [Doom Orb] has been added to your inventory.
  - [Flesh Essence] has been added to your inventory.
  - [Awakening Stone of Flesh] has been added to your inventory.
- 

“That’s a decent haul,” Jason said. “I’m not sure that the doom orb is going to help me out, though. If I’m breaking out of this place, I won’t need to unseal any more powers.

“Perhaps you should keep it, then,” Shade suggested. “A use can almost always be found for exotic items, even if that use was not what was originally intended.”

“Good point,” Jason said. “Some exotic items are more appealing than others, though.”

Jason went to the edge of his new territory, took out all his leftover unstable genesis cores and lobbed them into the gloom with all the silver-rank strength he could muster.

“I don’t want those things going boom the second we’re out of here. Do you think that gold-ranker blew up when he took them out?”

“Perhaps,” Shade said. “It seems equally likely that the cores disrupted his passage through the portal. He may have never come out the other side, his soul cast into the astral for my progenitor to claim.”

“What about the stable cores?” Jason asked. “I have a boatload of them. I’m kind of hoping they can help me stabilise the node space as I try to realign this link between worlds.”

“I think it will be safe,” Shade said. “Perhaps they can even be used to repair some of the transformation zones. Miss Dawn would be better equipped to advise you in this.”

“That would be nice.”

\*\*\*

Nikoleta and her family gawked at the indoor waterfall in the atrium of Jason’s pagoda, although after all they’d been through it was just one more thing on the pile of absurdity.

“This is your last chance to leave this place before I bring down the dome,” Jason said. “I don’t know what effect that will have. If you wish, I can send you outside first, but I can make no promises about what awaits you there either.”

“We have made our choice,” Nikoleta said, although her grandparents looked unhappy.

“Then I can offer you a suite to wait it out or you can observe from one of the balconies.”

“We’ll watch,” Nikoleta said.

“Very well.”

Jason was nervous and didn’t want to pass that along to the family, so he was uncharacteristically subdued. They took the elevator to the top floor and Jason led them out to look over his domain. The city extended out a few kilometres, beyond which was the forest spanning into the distance. Rising up beyond that were the windswept, agrarian highlands where he had found the family, the only survivors of the zone he had discovered. Unseen beyond those highlands was the wasteland city, waiting to be transformed.

“Transfigure new territory,” Jason murmured. They could not see the subsequent changes, although there was an industrial clanking that must have been cacophonous to be heard more than fifty kilometres away, through a range of hills and small mountains. Jason could feel the changes through his connection to the spirit domain, knowing that the once wasted city was being restored to a pristine industrial hub.

“Not that it does me any good.”

“Pardon?” Nikoleta asked.

“It’s nothing,” Jason said.



Jason estimated that the dome in the real world covered an area equivalent to his first and second territories, the pagoda and the city around it. His expectation was that when the transformation zone and the proto-space were separated, the city would remain. The rest he expected to be caught up in the proto-space as it disentangled from the transformation zone. He might even need to enter the now-separated dimensional space and eliminate an anchor monster to prevent a monster wave.

- 
- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
  - Territory has been renamed [Steamforge Circuit].
  
  - 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. Current severity reduction: 79.4%
  
  - Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?
- 

“That should be enough,” Jason said.

“Are you talking to the thing that lives in your shadow?” Nikoleta asked.

“He’s not a thing,” Jason said, not turning to look at her.

“He’s not human.”

“Neither are you!” Jason snapped, drawing all eyes. He panned his gaze over them.

“I’ve changed my mind. Shade, show them to a suite to wait this out.”

One of Shade's bodies emerged and led the family away as they threw wary glances back at Jason, who was quickly left alone. He thumped his hands angrily into the balustrade, then ran them anxiously over his face.

“They didn’t deserve that,” he said.

“You are under an understandable amount of stress, Mr Asano.”

“No one could ask for more,” Shade said, another body rising from Jason’s shadow.

“Yes they could,” Jason said. “If I do this and it isn’t enough, that’s game over. The world dies and not only did I fail to stop it but I probably sped it up.”

“Mr Asano, there are very few things in the cosmos that are truly new. I cannot say if what you are doing here is one of them but it is as far as I am aware and I have seen and heard more than you can imagine.”

“Great. I get to be the first guy to dissolve his planet in a new and interesting way.”

"Mr Asano—"

"I get it, Shade, bloody hell."

"Jason!" Shade yelled, causing Jason's head to make a startled swivel as he turned to his familiar.

"No one could ask for more," Shade repeated, his voice once more composed.

"Whatever we face here, we face together."

Jason felt the presence of his other familiars in his soul, silently supporting him. He looked out at his spirit domain.

"Stabilise the transformation zone."

\*\*\*

Outside the dome, the vast corpse of the tentacle monster lay sprawled where it had slid off the dome, having been killed in a pitched battle with the gathered magical factions. The different factions had already carved large chunks of it off, taking them away to study, while others continued to pore over the corpse. It had rapidly grown to the size of a three-storey building, looking like a humungous sea anemone. Its massive trunk of a body was topped by a huge maw ringed by a forest of prehensile tentacles. The tentacles grabbed people, tossing them into the mouth, killing many before the assembled group finally killed it.

Jack Gerling looked at it from the camp set up by the American Network. His explosive powers had been critical in slaying the massive creature that used to be the gold-ranker, Guo.

While inside the combined proto-space/transformation zone, Gerling had felt small for the first time in a very long time. He contemplated the kind of magic involved, not just in transforming the gold ranker but the world itself in the form of transformation zones. The growing and unruly magic could reshape the world and the most powerful people on it, leaving them with no ability to resist.

This was true for all but one person and his enigmatic struggle against cosmic forces Gerling did not understand. He didn't know how or why Asano was able to fight against powers that could reshape the world itself. His ability to open the previously impenetrable dome proved that he could, however. Gerling was determined to find out, and then find a way to take that power for himself.

Gerling felt a shift in the magic a moment before he saw the dome change. The swirling rainbow of the colours inside went wild, gradually going dark around the edges. Deep within the dome, the colour coalesced and changed, turning from rainbow chaos into a nebula pattern. An aura erupted from the dome, Gerling's aura senses detecting its

spread extending dozens of kilometres away. Gerling recognised the aura as belonging to Jason Asano.

## Chapter 424

### You Really Aren't Local

Standing on the balcony on the pagoda's top floor, Jason surveyed his spirit domain, stretching off into the distance. He felt his connection to the vast territory, as if it were part of him.

"Stabilise the transformation zone."

A tremor immediately rocked the pagoda and did not pass, instead, continuing as a constant rumble. The entire pagoda felt like it was being hauled on a truck with mediocre suspension.

- 
- You are using your spirit domain to stabilise and separate an intermingled transformation zone and proto-space. Dissolution of the proto-space will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the attached reality.
  - Consolidating the proto-space into a permanent astral space will lessen the detrimental effects of the process.
  - Would you like to consolidate the proto-space into an astral space Y/N?

---

Jason's eyes went wide, delighted at anything that would increase the chances of success.

"Yes!"

- 
- Consolidating the astral space will require the consumption of [Stable Genesis Cores]. How many [Stable Genesis Cores] will you dedicate to this process?

---

"All of them!"

- 
- 1327 [Stable Genesis Cores] have been consumed. Proto-space apotheosis will take place alongside transformation zone reality integration.

---

The rumbling tremor grew into a full-blown earthquake and Jason started seeing chunks of street tear themselves out of the ground to float into the air, shrouded in rainbow light. Tiles ripped themselves out from the footpaths and planters broke apart, spilling dirt and flowers as chunks of stone drifted upwards like errant balloons. Flagstones of dark crystal lifted out of the road to join them, and in every place that broke apart, rainbow light shone from the holes left behind. Jason watched the shattering of his domain spread out from the central site of the pagoda, accelerating as it extended throughout the city.

An increasing density of rainbow light filled the air, obscuring Jason's vision as he stepped back from the edge of the balcony. The light filled the air but did not encroach on the pagoda, including the balcony space where Jason stood. The last thing he saw before his vision was obscured entirely was the spreading damage reaching the forest beyond the city.

As the process continued, Jason's connection to his spirit domain delivered increasing levels of painful feedback. It started small, barely noticeable as the first chunks broke away. By the time he could no longer see past the edge of the balcony he was grimacing against the pain but it was nothing he couldn't endure. Even as it continued to escalate, he didn't let out a yell.

If Jason's soul had been weaker, the pain the process was inflicting would likely have scarred it, pushing it to grow stronger. Compared to what he had experienced in the past, though, this was insufficient to even make a dent. Compared to the Builder's attacks or even the backlash from trying to forcibly manipulate reality with his aura, this pain was water splashing his feet at the beach. Rather than push back or try and shield himself from the pain, Jason delved into it with his senses, trying to better understand the process taking place.

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Everyone outside the dome was scrambling. Ritualists from different Network splinter factions were rushing to study the changes in the dome while others were preparing to either charge forward or run for the hills, depending on how the dome changed.

Many more people had come for this transformation zone than those in the past. The original hope had been that multiple reality cores would appear when the dome finally dropped. As the dome remained in place longer and longer, eclipsing the duration of any previous one, those desires had grown more avaricious. The factions were now anticipating unknown treasures, untold knowledge and untapped power, all waiting to be seized. If they had to shake it out of Jason Asano, that was something they were willing to do.

Gerling only paid half-attention to Cleary, his handler, as Cleary briefed him on the directives of the higher-ups. Gerling's assistant Fiona would summarise any relevant points afterwards and his gold-rank mind could easily split his focus anyway.

He cared little for the priorities of the people ostensibly above him, but so long as they controlled the reality core supply, he had to keep up appearances. He could always grab some cores and go rogue but Gerling knew that was a foolish move until he had more

long-term plans. For the moment, it would be borrowing trouble without anything worthwhile to show for it, so he continued playing the easy-to-please thug.

“Do you understand?” Cleary asked.

“Understand what?” Gerling asked. “You did all that talking to tell me what I already knew. Go in when the dome drops, take anything I find and kick the crap out of anyone who gets in my way. Maybe I should be giving the briefings.”

Cleary sighed.

“That’s an... adequate summation. Just don’t start trouble you can’t finish.”

Gerling held up a tight fist.

“There isn’t any trouble I can’t finish.”

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Jason didn’t ignore the pain stabbing into his soul through his connection to the spirit domain. He followed it with his senses, using it as a path into the heart of the changes taking place.

Jason had spent some time now in the study of astral magic theory, but it was his time exploring node space, coming to grips with the building blocks of reality where his understanding had truly grown. Being in node space was like brushing his fingers over the individual atoms of a molecule.

There was a dichotomy between the astral and the physical, a duality that seemed not just naturally disparate but intrinsically opposed. The difference between the universe and the astral was the divide between physical and spiritual, between body and soul.

Jason knew this separation was not absolute, despite almost every aspect of reality signalling that it was. His own body merged the spiritual and the physical into a cohesive whole. Knowing was not the same as understanding, however.

Having extended his senses into the wild magic of the transforming domain, he observed from the inside the interplay of the astral and the physical as the transformation zone was extricated from the proto-space. The spirit domain was a part of him, giving him unique insight as it went through the process of merging with physical reality.

Jason's understanding underwent its own transfiguration as his perspective, so long contextualised only by physical reality, expanded exponentially. His grasp of the astral went through explosive expansion, giving him a new understanding of the most fundamental aspects of the cosmos.

“Some secrets are not meant for the likes of you,” a voice said and Jason withdrew his senses. Startled at the intrusion and angry at the interruption, he turned to face the owner of the voice.

Jason had not sensed the man's approach nor the opening of the portal arch behind him. It was quite unlike Jason's portals, other than the general arch shape, looking like a pile of hard, earthen bricks stacked loosely in place. The portal energy in the archway was a swirl of reds, browns and yellows.

The man standing in front of the portal had a shock of red hair and pale skin with a freckled complexion. His eyes were an inhumanly bright green. Compared to his striking features, his clothes were simple robes that were loose but not bulky enough to entangle, leaving him with excellent freedom of movement. It was much like the design Jason preferred, but while Jason favoured black, grey and red tones, this man's robes were in light, earthy shades. Combined with his hair and complexion, it made him look like a Scottish Jedi.

"Do you know Ewan McGregor?" Jason asked.

"That is what you're asking in this situation?" the man said, letting a little of his diamond-rank aura show.

"It's what came to mind," Jason said. "Obi-Wan Kenobi? Nothing? You really aren't local, are you?"

"I am Shako," he man said. "I am a servant of the Builder."

"I know," Jason said. "I picked up on your star seed when you tried to impress me by letting your aura poke out of your pants. Please tell me the builder didn't just blow up my world by shoving a ranga through the dimensional wall."

"No," Shako said. "This event provides a window through which I am able to enter and leave without harming your world, so long as I am gone before this space reasserts itself in physical reality."

"So the Builder thought he'd take the chance to send someone in and off me?"

"No," Shako said. "He sent me to deliver his thanks."

"For what?"

"The current Builder inherited the power of his predecessor, but also his responsibilities. He inherited the mistake that was this world. It costs him nothing but dignity should this world be annihilated but the dignity of a great astral being is no small thing."

"Really? Sounds like a holdover from his mortal days, to me. What does an infinite being care about dignity? It seems a little petty."

"Be careful with your words, mortal."

"Mate, your boss sucks."

Shako's expression went very blandly diplomatic.

“You did not encounter him in the best of vessels,” Shako said. “Thadwick Mercer lingered like a disease, affecting even subsequent vessels for a time.”

“Vessels like you?” Jason surmised.

“Yes,” Shako confirmed and Jason laughed.

“You caught a dose of Thadwick, that's hilarious. Also, tell your boss to shove it up his arse. Thadwick was a top-shelf prick but he didn't turn your boss into a cosmic land bandit. He didn't strip astral spaces off worlds, killing people in job lots from the fallout. How many people has it been across all the realities and all the worlds? Billions? Trillions? He can take his thanks for whatever he's thanking me for and shove it so far up his quoin that it pops out his nose.”

“How... colourful. You don't want the gift he offers as parts of his thanks, then?”

“Your damn right I don't. Thus far, everything the Builder has sent my way has impaled my body a whole bunch of times and even took a run at my soul.”

“This gift is sent with gratitude, not malice.”

“It wasn't? You should have led with that. I'm definitely going to take the word of a guy whose boss tried to core me like an apple.”

“You would do well not to impugn my integrity, silver-ranker.”

“Mate, you're a captain in the fleet of a cosmic pirate admiral. How many people have you killed in the name of your boss playing with blocks like an infant? I'd tell you to take your integrity and shove it up your boss' arse, next to where he put his thanks, but you beat me to it. Probably by a few centuries.”

Shako reached out and Jason lurched forward, his neck falling into Shako's grip. His aura crushed down, suppressing Jason's aura in an instant.

“So, more Vader than Obi-Wan,” Jason said, his voice unstifled by the grip on his throat. “Obvious, now that I think about it.”

Jason met the diamond-ranker's gaze, unfazed by having his aura ground down to nothing.

“You think I won't kill you for your insolence?” Shako asked.

“If you're going to kill me, I can do bugger-all about it. I'm not going to pretend your boss is worthy of respect first because he's not, and I don't think it matters anyway. Your boss sent you here with orders to kill me or not. I'm willing to bet you follow them, either way.”

Jason closed his eyes, letting his instinct guide him. He drew on his spirit domain and the vast quantities of power currently coursing through it as reality itself was reshaped.



Melding it with his suppressed aura, Jason aura projected not his own aura but that of his entire spirit domain, pushing back against the suppressive force of the diamond ranker.

Shako sneered as he felt Jason attempt to push back, but it dropped off his face as he felt the aura pressure him from all around. Jason's inexpert control of his spirit domain was not enough to push back the power of an ancient and powerful diamond ranker even a little, but even noticing that moment of pressure from a mere silver-ranker chilled Shako to the core.

Shako's empty hand swung out, splattering Jason's head like a rotting melon. Jason's neck chain fell to the floor as Shako then palm-slapped Jason's chest, the whole torso exploding backwards, scattering across the balcony and into the rainbow energy outside. The force of the strike warped Jason's sword, which was merely bronze-rank. It also fell to the floor.

Jason's scattered body parts burned up in dark flame, limned in silver starlight, which merged to take the shape of a dark, star-filled phoenix. Shako started gathering transcendent light between his hands but the phoenix shot back, disappearing into the rainbow energy.

Another portal appeared next to Shako's portal arch, this one a shimmering sheet of silver-grey light. Through it stepped Dawn in her true body. Her celestine form had ruby hair and eyes, glimmering like actual gemstones.

"That's enough, Shako."

## Chapter 425

### A Sliver of Hope

Jason's star phoenix form was impervious to almost any form of attack, with transcendent damage being a critical exception. His aura could downgrade transcendent damage, but with a diamond-ranker suppressing his aura that would not come into effect. He chose, then, to risk diving into the storm of energy reforging his spirit domain as Shako gathered transcendent energy for an attack. As he disappeared into the rainbow chaos outside of the pagoda, Dawn's true form emerged from a shimmering portal.

"That's enough, Shako."

"Dawn," Shako said, dismissing his gathered energy.

"I cannot imagine that this is what the Builder sent you here to do," Dawn said. "You have come into this world and killed Jason Asano. This is in express violation of the compact between the Builder, the Reaper and the World-Phoenix."

"This is not Asano's world," Shako countered.

"You may find it hard to convince the World-Phoenix and the Reaper of that."

"He deserved death. That man has taken that which belongs to the Builder and turned it against his faithful."

"Faithful? Is the Builder truly that obsessed with making a world so that he might become a god? He is already so much more. You realise the entire cosmos thinks he's gone mad."

"You would belittle the Builder for what he has made?" Shako asked. "Without the Fundament Gate he stole from the Builder, he would never have been able to affect this place and remake it."

"Then you should be grateful that he took it. The Builder had billions of years to rectify the mistakes of his predecessor, but his inaction has allowed the task to fall to a boy."

"You speak as if your World-Phoenix played no part."

"The World-Phoenix acts in accordance with her purpose," Dawn said, anger taking over her usually tranquil expression. "The Builder has ignored his own purpose by leaving the situation alone and has now chosen to make use of it in service of his private intentions. This world would not be crumbling if the Builder had not struck a bargain with a lowly god to exploit it."

"Perhaps I may have acted with haste," Shako conceded.

"You and your master both have a habit of thinking like mortals. You get caught up in pride and focus on singular things when you need to take a larger perspective. You are

like Asano in this way. I think, perhaps, that Thadwick Mercer was a more fitting vessel than you or the Builder are willing to admit. You pass off questionable decisions as his influence, yet is that truly the case?"

"I did not come here to be insulted or listen to your slander against my master, Dawn. There is only so much I am willing to tolerate, even from you."

"Clearly," Dawn said, looking pointedly at Jason's necklace and sword on the floor. They lay where they had fallen when Shako destroyed Jason's body. "But you didn't come here to violate the agreement your master made, either."

"I still hold that this is still not Asano's world. There is no violation."

"Then your master and mine will have to settle this with the Reaper, then."

Shako expression took on an angry grimace.

"Perhaps I have pushed the boundaries of the agreement and a concession can be made. When Asano returns to the other world, no Builder cultist of a rank higher than his will attack him."

Dawn smiled.

"That is worth less than nothing. The Builder doesn't keep its own word, so why would it keep yours? Even if it does, so what? Your promise does not preclude diamond-rank allies or a hundred silver-rankers being sent after Asano."

"You think the Builder so petty?"

"Yes. I would advise against trying to grab my throat for saying so, though."

Shako looked as if he had eaten something unpleasant as he swallowed his retort.

Dawn waited as he took a moment to calm himself.

"What do you want?" Shako asked, his voice measured once more.

"Asano claimed for himself something created by the Builder. A door."

"The Fundament Gate. Asano should not have such access to the foundations of reality."

"If the Builder didn't want mortals to have that kind of access, he shouldn't have given it to them."

"It was an item; the Builder's to give or take. Asano should not have absorbed it."

Dawn laughed, bringing a surprised expression to Shako's face.

"If the Builder thought that mortals would only use what he gave them for the purposes he intended, then he is as great a fool as any of them."

Shako seethed at the continuing insults to the Builder but Dawn was not Jason.

Shako showed not so much as the shadow of an aggressive move.

“I don’t know why you bring up the Fundament Gate,” Shako said through gritted teeth. “Asano had already taken it for himself and the Builder has neither claim nor control over it. Again, I ask, what is it that you want?”

“I wish to create an item that he can also absorb. One that lets him use the gate to anchor a bridge between Earth and Pallimustus, using the existing link as a basis.”

“An astral bridge is the domain of the World-Phoenix,” Shako said. “You don’t need the Builder for that.”

“Improperly anchored, the bridge will be vulnerable to tampering and destruction. The Fundament gate will allow him to securely anchor it in physical reality. Give me the designs of the Fundament Gate so the World-Phoenix may create a complimentary item that works with it.”

“That is not within my authority to offer,” Shako said. “The door was the Builder’s personal design.”

“But you do have it. You simply need permission to pass it along.”

“No. You ask too much.”

“Too much? I’m not even done making demands and already you’re refusing? Then the Builder’s violation of the agreement will stand. This means that the cult of the World-Phoenix may intervene directly with the Builder’s invasion of Pallimustus. We haven’t raised our hands since before you were born, but you’ve heard the stories, right?”

Shako’s expression went dark.

“In the face of an opportunity to be free to act directly,” he asked, “why would you accept another concession? Why would you do this for Asano?”

“He’s a friend.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I originally wondered why the World-Phoenix assigned me this task personally,” Dawn said. “I came to realise that it is not always good to become too separated from mortal sensibilities. Not a problem you seem to have, but I did and the World-Phoenix saw this. This is why she sent me to watch over a man whose sensibilities are very, very mortal.”

“Why would the World-Phoenix want you to become lesser?”

“Not lesser, Shako. Grounded.”

“When you are ascending to the heavens, grounded is lesser,” Shako argued. “You and I stand on the cusp of true transcendence. Why should we care about mortal concerns?”

“Because if we don’t understand the mortal parts of ourselves, it causes problems when we leave the last of our mortality behind.”

“What kind of problems?”

“Well, for example, we might go off and start looting worlds for parts so we can cobble them together in some mad desire to play god.”

“I will only tolerate these insults to the Builder for so long, Dawn.”

“We have not yet finished negotiating the consequences of the last time your patience expired,” Dawn said, her ruby eyes glimmering and her voice filled with cool but unmistakable menace. “Are you so anxious to concede even more?”

Shako took an involuntary step back.

“That’s what I thought,” Dawn said. “Now, our time is limited and we should return to the topic at hand. The designs for the door.”

“I can likely obtain them for you,” Shako said, although his expression was unwilling. “Again, though, I have to ask why. He has knowledge and power enough to build a bridge back to the other world using the link between them. He doesn’t need this object you want to build for him. You realise that if he absorbs it, he would be intrinsically linked to the bridge he subsequently creates. If he dies, the bridge will collapse.”

“Yes.”

Shako narrowed his eyes.

“That’s your intention,” he realised. “You’re looking past the Builder invasion of Pallimustus.”

“Yes. Asano is yet to realise that success in his current challenge will be the very thing that sets his next one in motion.”

“You haven’t told him, have you?”

“I am forbidden. Jason does not always make the best choices and the World-Phoenix doesn’t want him finding out and risking two worlds to avoid that outcome. This bridge will be his compensation. A sliver of hope in his darkest hour.”

“When the time comes, you won’t help him?”

“It falls outside the World-Phoenix’s authority and it will not be allowed. This is the most I can do.”

“And you would give up the chance to send all your forces against us for that?”

“The World-Phoenix is not the Builder. It prefers to avoid such crude methods. But I will need another concession.”

“And what is that?”

“Allowance for me to go to Pallimustus.”

“Absurd. Do you think the great astral beings will permit a half-transcendent to intervene in a physical reality of that level? If you go, the Builder can send his own half-transcendents and by the time we're all done fighting, that world will be a lifeless cinder. Neither of us wants that.”

“I will not confront any of your forces or deliver any material aid carrying the power of the World-Phoenix, any other great astral being, or otherwise disproportional to the existing power of the world in question. Under those terms, the great astral beings will allow it.”

“Then why bother going?”

“To warn them that you are coming. And when.”

“And you think I will allow this?”

“Allow? I'm going to Pallimustus and you can do nothing about it. Your choice is whether I'm bringing words or an army. Unless you genuinely believe the Builder can convince the others you did not violate the compact by killing Asano.”

Once more Shako seethed in silence, before raising his eyes to glare at Dawn.

“I cared about you very deeply, once,” he said.

“Yet you never really knew me. It's a very mortal failing.”

Shako frowned and then bowed his head. A presence came over him, transforming his aura from diamond-rank to transcendent. When he stood, his expression and body language were completely different. Gone was the frustrated rage, replaced with imperious stoicism.

“You are impertinent, servant of the World-Phoenix,” the Builder said.

“My new friend has been a bad influence,” Dawn said. “I believe you've met.”

“You seek to provoke me.”

“It's worked in the past.”

“I will not expose myself to further concessions,” the Builder said. He reached into his robes and retrieved a crystal holding it up in front of her.

“The designs of the Fundament Gate. You may have it, under the condition that it is designed such that once it is complete, Asano's ability to enter the fundamental realm and manipulate it is revoked.”

“Acceptable,” Dawn said. “He only does so out of necessity and has no other reason to access it.”

“Very well,” The Builder said, handing the crystal over. “You may travel to Pallimustus. So long as your actions are in accord with what we great astral beings collectively allow, I will not count it as a violation of the compact.”

“One more thing,” Dawn said.

“You test my forbearance, servant.”

“Your servant is the one who made the violation. Be grateful the World-Phoenix is willing to accept any concessions at all.”

“What do you want?”

“Your violation was in coming here and killing Asano. You have to leave him be in the other world.”

“He will come for my people. You expect them to lay down and die?”

“You will restrict your attempts to kill him to when he comes looking for trouble. That will be almost constantly, so that should not be an onerous concession. I won't bother with specific terms as we both know there will always be ways around them. You will agree to abide by the spirit of the condition I've put forth.”

“Acceptable. Asano is no more threat to me than any other silver-ranker. He is irrelevant to my greater plans.”

Dawn raised an eyebrow but did not argue.

“Then the terms are struck,” she said.

Shako staggered as the Builder left him. He looked unhappily at Dawn, and then made for his portal, pausing before passing through.

“It was good to see you, Dawn. Even under these circumstances.”

“They're only going to get worse, Shako. You chose a master poorly.”

“I chose the right one for me,” Shako said. “You have no right to judge me.”

Dawn nodded, acknowledging the point. Shako stepped through his portal arch and it sank into the floor, vanishing. Dawn looked down at Jason's warped sword on the floor and picked it up, carrying it through her portal.

\*\*\*

Jason returned to the balcony as the duration of his star phoenix form came to an end. The man that killed him was gone, along with the portal he arrived in. Instead, there was a vertical sheet of silver-grey light. He looked around, finding only his necklace with his dark guardian amulet and the miniaturised cloud flask hanging from it.

His sword was nowhere to be seen. He could still feel his connection to the soul-bound item, so it wasn't destroyed, but he could not sense its location. Without it, the additional effects of his other items would not take effect, so he couldn't call the mist shroud from his cloud flask.

Unsure of what to do next, Jason could sense the spirit domain approaching the end of its transformation. He examined the shimmering sheet of light with his aura senses

which confirmed his guess that it was a portal. Like Shako's, it was diamond-rank. As he was contemplating it, Dawn stepped out. It was the first time Jason had seen her true form, her red hair replaced with the gemstone hair of a celestine. She was wearing a flowing white robe trimmed with flaming colours of orange, yellow and red.

"Dawn? Looking good. You didn't see another guy around here, did you?"

"Shako is gone."

"Good. I honestly didn't think that guy would gank me."

"You are forgetting the door you took from the Builder. Just touching on your aura will send any Builder servant into a fury."

"Oh, right. He did feel a bit like a boiling kettle, but I thought that was just about the thing between me and the Builder."

"The star seed inside him reacted negatively to your aura. If he weren't powerful enough to control the urge, he might have attacked you on sight."

"He didn't control the urge. He killed me."

"You talked to him," Dawn said.

"You say that like it's an explanation."

"Of why someone would want to kill you? It is."

"That's a little hurtful."

"Jason, I have only a short time for explanations. I must leave before the transformation zone fully merges with your world."

She held up what looked like a small model bridge. It was contained in a crystal vessel, like a ship in a bottle.

"The World-Phoenix personally crafted this item moments ago. This is an object akin to the door of the Builder, and you can absorb it the same way. Once you have restored the link between worlds to its original state, or close enough that your world isn't in immediate peril, you can use it in node space to establish a bridge between worlds."

"A bridge. As in, a walk back and forth bridge?"

"Not at first," Dawn said. "Once you establish the bridge on both sides, it will stabilise the link between worlds and prevent the link from being manipulated again. Over time, the bridge will repair the damage to your world's dimension membrane and, eventually, open a passage between the worlds."

"How eventually?"

"Years. Possibly decades."

"It won't be my way back to Pallimustus, then."



“It can be, if you act swiftly. When the link is restored to a close enough point to its original state, there will be a backwash of magic as your world stops absorbing all the excess magic.”

“We’ve talked about that before. It’s what will trigger the monster surge in Pallimustus and let the Builder invade.”

“Yes. But you can also use that surge and the incomplete bridge to travel to Pallimustus, so long as you do so before the magical backwash dissipates. The outworlder gift evolution the World-Phoenix designed for you will allow you to survive the journey. Anyone you carry inside your spirit vault will be safe.”

“Will you be coming with us? I know you won’t go by spirit vault but you have an interdimensional spaceship or something, right? I’m assuming that’s where that portal come from since you don’t have a portal power yourself.”

“It is, and I will be leaving for the other world. Ahead of you, in fact.”

“You’re going now,” Jason realised.

“You have everything you need to do what must be done. More than that, I trust you to do it. The other world needs me more than you do.”

“For what?”

“After years of being in readiness for a monster surge that never comes, the other world will not be prepared when it finally does. We have a good estimate of how long you will take to repair the link so I’m going to warn them that it’s close.”

“I’ll see you there, then?”

“You will, although do not anticipate me solving your problems for you. I still have restrictions by which I must abide.”

“Of course you do. Can you check in on my friends for me?”

“I can and will.”

Jason pulled a recording crystal from his inventory and tossed it to her.

“Show that to my mates, yeah?”

“I will.”

“One last thing before I go. Once you complete the bridge on the other side, you will lose access to node space.”

“At that point, I won’t need it. What about the effect the door has on Builder minions?”

“The lost power to open node space will be channelled into enhancing that effect.”

Jason grinned.

“I’ll call that a win.”

Dawn looked past Jason at the energy storm swirling beyond the balcony.

"I cannot delay any longer."

"Yeah, no worries. Oh, have you seen my sword? The other guy didn't take it, did he?"

"Your sword is in no state to be of use, so I have taken it," she said walking up to the portal. "It shall be waiting for you in the other world."

"Nice. You know, for a super god's lackey, you're an alright sheila."

"Better to be a queen than a pawn, Jason."

Before he could respond, she stepped through the shimmering portal and it vanished.

"Bugging off with the last bloody word, are you?" he said to the empty space the portal had occupied. A warm smile crossed his face.

"Yeah," he conceded. "It was a pretty good exit line."

## Chapter 426

### End-User Licence Agreement

Jason looked out at the swirling rainbow energy beyond the pagoda. A moment of desperation had led him to dive into it while in the star phoenix form following his latest resurrection. The energy that had passed through him in that unusual state had once more heightened his understanding of the astral energies at play.

The gains were not worth the trade-off. Jason no longer had the safety net of his resurrection power, at least not until he ranked up in a decade or more. There was nothing he could have done in the face of a diamond-ranker and he still didn't know if that had been the Builder's intention all along.

Had the Builder sent Shako ostensibly under a flag of resolving conflict that he might 'lose control' and kill Jason in anger? Was the entire purpose to try and strike at Jason when the agreement with the other great astral beings was arguably not in effect? No one was under the illusion that Jason would actually die, but now he would head back to a world full of the Builder's minions with permanent death very much a concern.

Jason reached out a hand and let the rainbow light flow through his fingers, no longer fearful of the energies involved. He now understood both it and himself enough that he no longer feared contacting it. Jason's body, like the energy itself, was a gestalt of the physical and the spiritual, of matter and non-material forces not just paired like body and soul, but reforged into something else.

Jason also had some ability to manipulate the rainbow energy. This was a combination of his nature, his understanding and one of the effects of the bespoke outworlder power the World-Phoenix designed for him.

- 
- While within the astral you will be able to create and maintain a small zone of physical reality around you. This does not grant the ability to enter or traverse the astral.

---

Jason didn't do anything with the energy as it washed between his fingers, not being foolish enough to interfere with the larger process going on. At first, it had seemed like the pagoda would remain unchanged, but this was not the case.

- 
- Pagoda transfiguration will take place in stages. Please evacuate the third floor.
-

“Wait,” Jason said. “Is that the European/Australian floor naming where it goes ground floor, then first floor, second floor, etc, so what’s called the third floor is the fourth level of the building? Or is it the system they use everywhere else, where the ground level is the first floor, the second level is the second floor, etc?”

---

### Help: Localised Floor Designations

- Floor numbering begins on the ground floor, with the first floor above it being designated the ‘first floor.’ Would you like to change the numbering to an alternate system?

---

“It’s fine. I just don’t want to evacuate the wrong floor.”

- 
- The third floor is the fourth level of the building. Please evacuate any people and do not allow access during the transfiguration process.

---

The Slovakian family was one level below that, on the floor made up entirely of residential suites.

“Shade, make sure our guests don’t go wandering.”

“Of course, Mr Asano.”

After a short while, energy flooded over the pagoda balcony on the third floor, washing in and sending the pagoda through another transformation. After it washed back out, the system warned Jason to evacuate the top floor, then the others in descending order. He wasn’t sure why the process started on the second-highest floor but it was likely because that’s where the portal room was.

Jason reunited with the family as they played musical chairs with the transforming pagoda levels. The transformed levels took a form much more like the city around it had been, constructed out of cloud-stuff in fairy tale colours, mimicking the makeup of the constructs from Jason’s cloud flask. This was everything from walls, floors and ceilings to furniture and fittings.

The transformation also came with a redesign. The ground floor remained much the same: an atrium with a waterfall in the middle of the room, spilling from the mezzanine above. The first floor continued to overlook the atrium but was an open space that was the new portal area. There were ten portal arches, all in the dark crystal of Jason’s portal arch, but none of them were active.

The second floor was taken up by what looked to be an administrative centre, with offices and a bullpen. The third, formerly the portal room level, was taken up by a single

residential suite with multiple bedrooms. The top floor was a single bedroom residential suite. The entire pagoda was flooded with Jason's aura, which felt benevolent rather than hostile, except for on the top floor. There it was heavy and oppressive, except to Jason himself.

There were also new levels underground, which were empty storage spaces. As with the top floor, Jason's aura was much stronger there.

As Jason explored the pagoda in the wake of its latest changes, he felt the energy outside start to thin. It was imperceptible to ordinary senses, at first, but by the time Jason was again standing on the top floor balcony, it was visibly disappearing. He started seeing the city reappear through the swirling rainbow light and spotted the dome high above. As expected, the pagoda was placed directly under the dome's peak. Unlike when he had entered, the dome was much darker, but with a swirling nebula of colour.

\*\*\*

Gerling could sense the change in the dome. It was the first time this idiosyncratic example held true to his experiences from other transformation zones, as it was the familiar feeling of a dome about to vanish, revealing what lay inside.

Gerling was far from the only one poised to move after sensing the change, and when parts of the dome started to dissolve, all the people who had been wary after the dome's changes suddenly charged back up the sides, looking for holes to dive into. Gerling didn't join them, remaining impassively at the edge of the American Network camp. The other gold-ranker from the US, who had arrived just hours ago, did not share his reticence, tearing off at speed.

"Gerling!" his handler, Cleary yelled. "Why aren't you moving?"

"I'll go when I'm good and ready," Gerling snarled.

"Every major force in the world has bolstered their presence here, and you want to play wait and see?"

Gerling looked at Cleary with disdain.

"I've been in there once. Rushing around is a good way to get killed."

"That was when it was active," Cleary said. "Now that the dome is coming down, normal magical conditions will reassert themselves."

Gerling didn't bother to argue, closing his eyes and extending his senses. With the dome at its centre, Asano's aura had covered a geographically significant portion of western Slovakia. Gerling felt it now start to rapidly contract. He wanted to see what state it ended up in before he approached the swiftly-opening transformation zone.

"I didn't take you for a coward," Cleary said and Gerling's eyes shot open to get a missile lock on Cleary's face. Gerling's aura squeezed Cleary's like a car compactor until Cleary stood quivering on the spot.

"I'm sorry, I was distracted," Gerling apologised. "I didn't hear that last thing you said. Would you be so kind as to repeat it?"

Cleary's mind was screaming at his legs to run but they wouldn't listen.

"Mr Cleary?" Gerling asked quizzically.

Gerling released his aura and Cleary fled in a stumbling run.

\*\*\*

The rainbow light was gone and sunlight broke through the dome more and more as it dissolved away. It lit up the fairytale kingdom that Jason's city had turned into, with colourful cloud houses, tiled pathways, flowers, trees and parks. The designs were an eclectic hodgepodge of styles, drawing influences from across the world, with Middle-eastern influences bumping into Japanese, South American and European influences. It should have been a hodgepodge, yet somehow worked, the odd, magical materials and bright colours tying it all together.

"In an animated movie kind of way," Jason mumbled to himself as he looked it over. He was anxiously awaiting system boxes that he knew would be coming.

- 
- You have successfully separated the overlapping transformation zone and proto-space. Transformation zone is reintegrating with physical reality. Effects of the abnormal space are no longer in place. Your essence abilities are unsealed.
  - Transformation zone was not fully stabilised. Reintegration with physical reality is having a localised disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane, risking rupture.
  - Proto-space has been stabilised into a permanent astral space. This is stabilising the disruption and dispersing it to have a diminished effect over a wider area.
- 

Jason felt a tremble in the ambient magic. To him, with his soul strength and connection to the astral, it was a ripple in a pond. He could sense that it was happening on a massive scale, however, and worried that to others it would be a tsunami.

\*\*\*

While there were many silver and even gold-rank individuals around the dome, there were far more bronze and iron-rankers in the camps in supporting roles. When the world's magic became a tidal wave of chaos, the silver-rankers fared well enough and the gold-rankers were fine but the rest fell to the ground, screaming.

Gerling felt some of the iron-rank auras get snuffed out as they couldn't handle the pressure and died. The normal rankers in the area, mostly in the nearby city of Nitra, did not seem to be affected in any impactful fashion, at least so far as Gerling's senses could make out.

Gerling closed his eyes, expanding his aura over the American network's camp and trying to shield it from the effects. It was only partially effective, but that was enough to bring the bronze-rankers to their senses, while the iron-ranks went from tortured screams to pain-stricken moans.

\*\*\*

Jason jumped lightly off the balcony, grabbed the edge of the roof above with his restored shadow arm and flicked himself onto it. Standing at the peak of the slope, he observed his surroundings as the dome continued to dissolve over his head.

- 
- Dimensional disruption has rendered the dimensional membrane more permeable, raising the baseline magic density level of [Earth]. Localised zones of increased dimensional permeability will have heightened levels of magical density.
  - Once the new levels of ambient magic have normalised, [Earth] will no longer be subject to restrictions on mana, stamina and health recovery due to extreme low magic conditions.
  - Due to increased levels of magic permeability, magic will no longer accumulate externally and manifest as proto-spaces. Magic will manifest directly in the world.
  - [Earth] is currently subject to an abnormally large influx of magic. The newly permeable dimensional membrane is more vulnerable to excessive magic and will degenerate more rapidly.
- 

Jason's shoulder's slumped with relief. It was far from good news, but at least the world wasn't going to be destroyed this week.

"Congratulations, Mr Asano," Shade said, manifesting from Jason's shadow. "You just saved the world."

Jason let out a weary laugh.

"I thought it would feel awesome, but I'm just tired."

"Perhaps it will feel better after you have time to rest," Shade suggested.

"I don't have time to rest," Jason said. He could already feel silver and gold-rankers encroaching on his spirit domain.

As anticipated, his domain now covered the space up to his second territory, which was the original stretch of city. The rest had been shunted into an astral space that he could sense, both with his power to detect astral spaces and through his connection to it.

He felt the power of his spirit domain settling around him and it was accompanied by a wall of text.

---

- You have established a permanent spirit domain. The maximum total area your spirit domains can cover is limited by your soul strength and your rank. Current amount of maximum spirit domain established: 3266%. Increase your rank to increase your maximum total spirit domain size.
- This spirit domain has a connected astral space. The astral space gains the full effects of your spirit domain but does not count against your maximum spirit domain size. The portals in the [Arrival Pagoda] connecting to various locations in the astral space are now active. Any non-hostile may use the portals by default but you may individually grant or deny access or set alternate criteria for entry.
- The magical density of your spirit domains and the interconnected astral spaces is artificially limited to silver-rank. This only effects monster manifestations as non-monster manifestations are not connected to magical rank. Increase your rank to increase the level of monster manifestations that occur within your spirit domains.
- Monster manifestations will be shifted to outside of your spirit domain or into wilderness areas of the attached astral space. Monsters that manifest into wilderness areas of the astral space are not subject to the negative effects of the astral space.
- Anyone or anything hostile to you, your domain or any non-hostiles within your domains will immediately acquire the [Blood From a Stone], [Mortality] and [Weakness of the Flesh] afflictions. They will also continually accumulate instances of the [Sin] affliction, which they will clearly sense. Those that remain for extended periods will periodically accumulate instances of the [Wages of Sin] affliction. Any hostile actions against you, your domain or anyone within your domain will immediately accumulate additional instances of [Wages of Sin]. All spirit domain effects ignore rank disparity and cannot be resisted or cleansed but end immediately on departure from the spirit domain.
- Anyone who dies from the effects of the spirit domain will be consumed by transcendent damage. They will be looted and their possessions will be sent to the vault in the [Arrival Pagoda] of that domain space.
- Hostility is determined by the true intent of those entering your spirit domain. Their true intent cannot be hidden by any means, including self-deception. You may individually designate anyone within your spirit domain as hostile or non-hostile at any time.
- Those who truly venerate you while within your spirit domain will have instances of curse, disease, poison, holy and unholy afflictions periodically converted to instances of [Integrity].
- You can sense the location and aura of anyone within any of your spirit domains at any time, over any distance. There are no means to avoid this effect, regardless of rank or nature of the ability. At your current rank, this effect can cross the localised



dimensional boundary of an astral space but not between universes. Increase your rank to sense your spirit domains in alternate realities.

---

"It's like an end-user licence agreement. Can I just hit 'I agree' and move on?"

Jason understood what his spirit domain could do through his connection to it. The whole veneration aspect worried him a great deal so he put it aside to concentrate on the aspects that would keep him alive with as a good portion of the world's magical power descending on him.

Broadly speaking, anyone who invaded the domain with hostile intent would get a warning as they accumulated the sin affliction. They would also get a set of Jason's afflictions that let his powers bypass immunities. If they ignored the warnings and refused to leave, they would suffer damage that continued to multiply until it killed them and their body was erased from existence.

"That's quite harsh."

Jason could already feel the power affecting the ambitious intruders looking for plunder. They were rushing through the city, some searching the houses on the outskirts while others, largely the more powerful ones, rushed towards the pagoda they saw towering over the city. The new buildings were no more than two or three storeys high, so it was easy to see.

Waiting on the pagoda's roof, Jason returned his outfit to his inventory, calling his conjured blood robe and starlight cloak. Jason held out a hand, blood spraying out to accumulate into Colin's humanoid form. Looking like Jason minus the cloak, but with purple-red skin, he stood to Jason's left. Shade stood to Jason's right and Gordon also manifested, forming a line with the others as they awaited the gold-rankers, silver-rankers and ancient vampires running, riding and flying towards them.

"Shade, could you take the family down into the vault, please?"

"Of course, Mr Asano."

## Chapter 427

### Negotiations

Gold-rankers, silver-rankers and even a few bold bronze-rankers went storming into the dome as it broke down. Once it was entirely gone and the transformed area revealed for all to see, even more followed.

Gerling still stood patiently, observing. Usually, a transformation zone turned an area into a supernatural reflection of its original state, but the Slovakian farmland had turned into a town from an animated movie, with colourful cloud houses, flowers and trees everywhere. It wasn't even the same as it had been while Gerling was inside.

Even as Gerling observed, he sensed the bronze-rankers all turn back and leave the zone. Many of the silver-rankers were doing the same and Gerling moved to meet one returning to the American Network camp. Gerling led him into the prefab building that held the camp bar, went behind the counter and poured them a stiff drink each.

"Thanks, Jack," the man said and they both knocked back their glasses with a gulp. Gerling poured them another glass each.

"What did you run into, Clint?"

"I'm not sure," Clint said. "As soon as I entered that weird town it felt like I was trespassing. The sense grew as I didn't leave and there was this growing sense of dread. More than that, though, it was like I was, I don't know. Setting myself up for retribution? The worst part, the thing that got me the hell out of there, is that I kind of felt like I deserved it. That creeped me right out and I bailed."

"Like you deserved it? That retribution you felt coming?"

"Yeah. It's like... I'm not sure how to describe it. It was as if I knew that my own choices were wrong and whatever happened to me, I had coming."

"Like a sin," Gerling said.

"Yeah, that's it," Clint said. "I never grew up religious, but yeah. It's like trespassing on that place is a sin. How does that work?"

"Sin is one of Asano's essences," Gerling said. "He did that to you."

"I'm going to leave that guy to you," Clint said. "He's clearly above my pay grade, and my pay grade is pretty damn good."

Clary opened the door and walked in.

"Wagner," he said, looking at Clint. "Why did you go in there, only to turn around and come right back?"

"It's dangerous," Gerling said. In a blur of gold-rank speed, he moved around the bar and interposed himself between Clint and Cleary. Cleary took a step back, still shaken from his last conversation with Gerling.

"We're missing our window."

Gerling tilted his head as he concentrated on his aura senses.

"The first silver-ranker just died trying to get back out," Gerling said. "The others are running for it but he went too deep."

"Died?" Cleary asked. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It wasn't one of ours."

"Goddamn it," Cleary said, running a hand over his mouth. "Wagner, the place is really that hostile?"

"Just walking in there felt like a sin," Clint confirmed.

"Sin?" Cleary asked, sharing a look with Gerling. "Asano?"

Gerling nodded.

"He's clearly in control," Gerling said.

"Couldn't you have taken control while you were in there?" Cleary asked. "You're stronger than him."

"You may have noticed, Cleary, but Asano is neck-deep in mysteries. He had enough control from the start to be in control of whether we came or went. As much as I loathe to admit it, I wouldn't have gotten out of there without him."

"And now he's what? Built a magical town in the European countryside?"

Cleary shook his head with a sigh.

"Alright," Cleary continued. "I'm going to put a moratorium on our people going in until we learn more," Cleary said. "No point sending our people to die when we don't even know what's in there. In the meantime, could you get closer and see if you can glean any information about the place? Your senses are better than most of the tests our ritualists can do."

Gerling nodded.

"I'll go take a look."

\*\*\*

Jason sensed the two elders of the Slovakian family taking on sin afflictions and mentally removed them from the list of people being attacked by his spirit domain. It seemed that Nikoleta wasn't kidding about her grandparents thinking ill of him.

He could feel the intruders suffering the effects as they moved into the astral space. Some were turning back quickly while others only did once the ominous feelings they

experienced became necrosis eating away at their flesh. Only those who had charged in towards the pagoda and then ignored the damage they were taking suffered greatly and the silver-ranked ones amongst them turned back.

The silver-rankers had no trouble escaping if they left promptly and the gold-rankers could endure far more. Only the bold bronze-rankers who ignored the ominous feelings and kept going until the damage kicked in were killed.

It was only a matter of time before the multiplicate effects of the damage overcame even the gold-rankers, but they were an order of magnitude tougher than even silvers. While the defensive measures of Jason's domain ignored rank disparity, they were still silver-rank effects. The gold rankers would be able to hold out for a considerable time.

Two gold-rank essence users and three vampires approached the pagoda through the air. One of the essence users was Chen, who Jason already knew, while the other was white, which meant American. Chen was flying freely, while the other essence user was held aloft by mechanical wings. Two of the vampires were standing on a cloud of blood mist, while the last was on the back of a giant raven that had no trouble beating its wings to hover in place.

They lined up in the air in front of the pagoda, where Jason and his familiars were lined up in turn. Jason pushed the hood back to reveal his face.

"Something I can help you with?" he asked casually.

"Mr Asano," Chen said. "How much control do you have over this place?"

"Mate, when was the last time you have a little tug-a-lug?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know, took a solo flight. Picked a pound of meat. Rubbed the lamp until the genie came out."

Chen took on an incredulous expression.

"Are you talking about...?"

"Yep," Jason said.

"Why would you ask that?"

"Based on how you kicked off this conversation, I thought that questions the other person definitely won't answer was the dynamic we were going with."

"Why bother letting this weakling prattle," one of the vampires said. "I will make him talk."

"No—" Chen said but the vampire had already leapt off the blood cloud at Jason.

Vampires lacked the magical senses of an essence user, so it hadn't noticed the invisible

bubble Jason had encapsulated the pagoda's roof in. It was a feature of his cloud constructs, just a normal wall with the transparency maxed out.

After it had already jumped, the vampire's gold-rank sense of touch realised the bubble was there from the way air was moving around him. He shifted to landed gracefully on the dome instead of smacking into it and immediately started hammering on the slightly squishy, invisible dome of cloud-stuff with his fist.

"Colin," Jason said.

Red strips of bloody cloth shot out from Colin, wrapping around the vampire's arms, legs and head. It pulled itself free easily and leapt back to the mist cloud, but savage welts marked its skin where the clothing had been ripped away.

"You can force your way through this barrier," Jason said. "While you do that I'll drop down through the roof, which you'll need to break through as well. Then the next one and the next one. How long do you think you can stick around for? You category fours are tough but surely you realise the damage is increasing exponentially."

"We would like to negotiate access to this space," Chen said.

"Because that's how the Vikings did it," Jason said. "They took their longboats, rowed over to England and negotiated the rape and pillage rights."

"This man blathers nonsense," the injured vampire said, even as its wounds closed up. "We should act together. The barrier isn't that strong."

"There are no treasures for you here," Jason said.

"You expect us to believe that?" the other essence user asked.

"I don't care what you believe," Jason said. "There's a whole town of stuff that doesn't help you at all but feel free to poke around for as long as it takes you to melt."

"The good stuff is obviously in this tower," the American said. "I'm coming around the vampire's plan. Let's smash our way in."

"If that is what you intend, then I wish you luck," Chen said. "I disregarded Mr Asano's warning once before and almost lost my life, so I will not participate."

He turned to Jason.

"Is there truly no room for compromise, Mr Asano?"

"If I didn't have the power to hold you off, you'd all be holding me upside down and shaking out the goodies," Jason said. "You come here to take my stuff, realise you can't, and then want to compromise? With the deepest respect, Mr Chen, go stick it up your arse."

Chen gave Jason a little smile that didn't reach his eyes.

“Then I will take my leave,” Chen said. “I can feel the power of this place affecting me more and more by the moment, so I shall withdraw. I recommend the rest of you do the same.”

Chen left, leaving the three vampires and the other essence user. Not trusting the vampires and not liking the odds, the essence user followed Chen.

“We will go,” one of the vampires told Jason. “The day will come when you will pay for your arrogance.”

“It usually does,” Jason admitted sadly.

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Shade’s plane form rode high over the skies of Italy as Jason relaxed. He’d managed to get away from his spirit domain using his portal ability, having scouted out potential portal destinations before arriving at the dome. He’d known going in that he would be surrounding himself with what were, if not enemies, at least unhelpfully avaricious magical factions and would need an exit strategy.

Before leaving, he had made contact with the Slovakian government, which the family of farmers had asked him to deliver them to. He could only assume that anyone else in the dome had died during the transformation, as they were not in the city and could not be found in the astral space. The astral space itself was a mixture of the environments that had been in his territories, but more integrated than the original concentric rings.

Jason sent the family to their government representatives via portal, arranging a future meeting at the same time. Jason had, after all, essentially annexed twenty-six square kilometres of sovereign state. That subsequent meeting had not gone well.

“It’s time, Mr Asano,” Shade said.

Jason grinned, not getting up from the chair he was reclining in.

“This is nice,” he said. “It’ll be good to jump out of a plane when I’m not racing off to fight were-dinosaurs or take out the guys who blew the plane up. I can just enjoy it.”

“Shall we, then?” Shade asked.

“Go for it.”

The plane turned into a cloud of shadow that was absorbed by Jason as he arced through the air. He didn't even break his pose at first, legs cross and arms behind his head. Eventually, he tilted his weight to flip himself over and look at Venice sprawled out below. Eventually, he conjured his cloak and directed himself to where he had left the cloud boat in which Farrah and his family were hidden, landing lightly on the deck. He went inside to an industrial clamp hug from his niece and greetings from the group relieved to see him.

“They’re speculating on the news that someone kidnapped you,” Erika said. “They still don’t know who attacked the meeting with the Slovakian government.”

“It was the government themselves,” Jason said. “When the Network split, the various Governments ended up working with different Network factions or turning to the Cabal or EOA. The Slovaks ended up with Network’s leadership faction.”

“They’re calling themselves the True Network now,” Farrah said.

“Whatever they call themselves,” Jason continued, “they don’t have gold-rankers like China and the US. They’re caught between them and the vampires, looking down the barrel of irrelevance. They thought I could help them tilt the scale. Actually had the nuggets to try and make a deal after I...”

He glanced at Emi sitting on a couch next to him.

“...dealt with their tactical teams.”

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Jason shared a sanitised version of his experiences with his family and then the more thorough version privately with Farrah. With her, he didn't skip over the elements like his death and what Dawn had told him.

“We have decisions to make,” Farrah said. “It would make sense to move your family at Asano village from the village to this spirit domain of yours. With all the complications that would entail, though, that may be trouble.”

“That occurred to me as well, but I don’ think it’s worth it. There are eyes on the village and the spirit domain, and while we can get around them, it would be logistically challenging. There have been family members reporting to the factions from the beginning. What happens when the spirit domain sees them as hostile? Kick them out? Let them in anyway? Plus, who knows how many would want to take that leap. Asano village has been a haven as the world goes mad and I’m sure a lot of them wouldn’t want to leave.”

“All that would be time-consuming to deal with,” Farrah said.

“I didn’t fix the transformation perfectly,” Jason said. “I stopped the end of the world from happening more or less immediately, but the clock is counting down faster than ever. I’d like to move the family but I can’t afford that kind of delay.”

“Magical manifestations have begun happening in the lowest-magic areas,” Farrah said. “It’s mostly just lesser monsters and a few iron-rank ones but people are panicking. The Network factions are tracking them using the grid and there won’t be any more monster waves, but now monsters are just turning up places.”

“So that’s it,” Jason said. “The non-magical world I left is now magical. People are going to start stumbling across essences. Monsters can show up anywhere.”

"It was never really without magic," Farrah pointed out.

"It was to most of us," Jason said.

"The other thing to be aware of is the vampires. They're taking over more and more places, mostly here in Europe and in South America. The US have theirs largely contained and China seems to as well, although it's hard to tell with their media blackout policy. No one is sure what's happening in Russia, but the rumours are that the vampires and the rest of the Cabal have all but gone to war."

"If the vampires and the rest of the Cabal split like the Network did, that's good for team anti-vampire apocalypse," Jason said. "We need to get back to fixing the link between the worlds before the vampires make any large, collective moves."

"Indications are that it's close," Farrah said. "If even the public news knows that, war is probably imminent. What about our plan to raid the blood-enhancement site here in Venice?"

"We'll go ahead with it. That blood and those loose reality cores will be of use to us."

"That leaves the question of how to track nodes, now that we don't have proto-spaces to use."

"That, I think I can manage. My time inside the dome cost me a life, but my understanding of astral forces and how they relate to node space was advanced quite a lot. I may be able to track nodes faster and more reliably than our old methods."

"That's good to hear," Farrah said.

"There's something we need to sort out first, though," Jason said. "I picked up some loot while I was away."



## Chapter 428

### Another Day for Vampires

Jason and Farrah were sitting in a cabin on the cloud boat, going over the gains from Jason's adventures in the transformation zone. The biggest were two items he had looted from the vampirically-transformed gold-ranker, Tran. The first was a bracelet; a simple loop of marbled red and black stone.

---

Item: [Blade of the Blood Queen] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

*A bracelet bestowing a fragment of the power belonging to the Queen of Blood (jewellery, bracelet).*

- Effect: Bladed weapons conjured with iron-rank or lower abilities while wearing this bracelet inflict a health and stamina drain when making attacks. The drain effect is enhanced on vampiric enemies and other enemies that hoard stolen life force. Rather than heal the wearer, the drained life force is stored within the bracelet.
- Effect: Each time a minor threshold of health is cumulatively drained, an instance of [Blood of the Immortal] is bestowed on the wearer. This does not consume the bracelet's stored life force. This effect does not occur if the wearer has no blood.
- Effect: Once the major threshold of health is cumulatively drained, the wearer may consume all life force in the bracelet at any stage to gain [Power of the Blood Queen]. This ability cannot be used if the wearer has no blood.
- [Blood of the Immortal] (boon, healing, unholy, stacking): On suffering damage, an instance is consumed to grant a powerful but short-lived heal-over-time effect. Additional instances can be accumulated but do not have a cumulative effect.
- [Power of the Blood Queen] (boon, unholy): [Power], [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes are massively increased. Damage reduction and resistance to blood effects are enhanced. While this ability is in effect, the drain effect applied to bladed weapons is enhanced and directly drains life force to the bracelet's wearer instead of the bracelet. Life force drained while the wearer is uninjured increases the duration of this effect.

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"It's a bit redundant for me," Jason said. "My blood powers do pretty much the same thing. One of them even gives me the exact same healing effect. The bracelet's Sunday punch is stronger than what I have but you'll get more out of it than I will. If you stack this on top of your existing self-buffs, you can probably take on an ancient vampire solo."

"We'll need to rank it up," Farrah said.

"Like I said, I've got materials stacked up in piles. There were these nice rolling hills with a bunch of trolls. It was all might, growth and blood, in essences, awakening stones

and huge piles of quintessence. I haven't seen so many since I looted a plant the size of a city."

Large quantities of blood quintessence and spirit coins were required to upgrade the growth item, of which Jason had plenty. It was always a relatively accessible form of quintessence and Jason had long been stockpiling it for resummoning Colin if needed.

"If we can get it up to silver-rank it should make a good dent in some vampires," Farrah said.

"That's not the only thing the vampire dropped," Jason said, pulling out an ornate, four-sided glass lamp. "It's not as powerful as the sun crystal I spent to get it, but as compensation goes, it could be worse."

The lamp was framed in silver and gold, with sapphire settings and a diamond in the centre, in place of a flame.

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Item: [Beacon of the Day] (gold rank, rare)

*Mana lamp variant that extends its coverage by enhancing only a specific aspect of magic density (tool, lamp).*

- **Effect:** When inactive, the lamp accumulates and stores ambient magic. Rate of accumulation is dependent on the magical density of the local area.
- **Effect:** When active, the lamp enhances the magical density of sunlight in a wide area. The lamp does not generate sunlight itself. This has no other effects on local magical density.

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"This is potentially a huge boon for us," Farrah said. "Only the weakest vampires will be affected by sunlight in most places on Earth. That will affect the iron-rank ones, and the bronze to a lesser degree. This lamp, though, could turn the tides against any vampire who thinks it doesn't need to fear the day."

"The best part is that it's not an item we need to carry, so we can use it without getting magical backlash for not being gold rank ourselves. How much effect will it have on vampires?"

"Depends on the vampire," Farrah said. "A gold-rank vampire will drop down to the level of a mid-to-high silver in terms of attributes. Maybe even a low-rank silver, depending on the vampire and how strong the lamp is. They'll probably lose access to their bloodline powers as well, at least the more extravagant ones. Weaker vampires will be hit even harder, with iron-rank vamps being reduced to normal human levels and bronze not doing much better."

"The lower rank ones were never that much of a concern anyway," Jason said.

“Don’t be so quick to dismiss them,” Farrah said. “While you’ve been off saving the planets, I’ve been looking into how the vampires are operating in cities they’ve taken over like this one.”

“You have been careful, right?”

“You’ve died so many more times than me,” Farrah pointed out. “I may not have the stealth powers you do, but I’ve been an adventurer for almost a decade. I know my profession.”

Jason held up his hands in surrender.

“I don’t doubt it. What did you find?”

"I centred my attention on the blood treatment facility we found. In the two weeks you've been gone there's been a big uptick in activity, specifically around lower-rank vampires. I've seen a lot of them going in and their aura are noticeably stronger when they come out. Also, their auras are less stable, more feral. What you'd expect from vampires in my world."

“You think they’ve found a way to accelerate vampire advancement at the cost of self-control? Make the Cabal’s vampires into a more powerful army?”

“I think it’s worse than that,” Farrah said. “Almost all the vampires I’ve been seeing are fresh. I think they’re turning the populace and then trying to ramp up their power at the cost of them devolving into ghouls.”

“Like the ones we saw at the Network headquarters in Sydney,” Jason said, horrified realisation crossing his face. “They want to do that to the entire city?”

“The ones still alive.”

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Jason woke up in a cold sweat. He didn’t even think he could sweat anymore, his nightmares clearly having a disruptive effect on his equilibrium. His dreams had been plagued with images of the victims of Makassar, risen from the dead, blended his visions of Venice and other cities, overrun with unliving monsters.

As his cloud bed wicked away the sweat, Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“Mr Asano, Miss Hurin and your sister are at your door.”

“Why?” Jason asked groggily. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“Your ill-resting slumber had an unfortunate effect on your aura, Mr Asano. Your control over it was uncharacteristically loose.”

Jason sat bolt upright.

“Did I hurt anyone?”

"No, Mr Asano. You have learned Miss Hurin's lessons well and the projection was not harmful. Miss Hurin and I have concluded that the local vampires have likely become aware of our presence in the city, however."

Jason stood up and blood oozed from the pores of his skins, transforming into his blood robes as he moved to the door and opened it.

"Jason," Erika said immediately. "You scared the hell out of Emi, what did you..."

She trailed off as he turned to look at her and she found herself facing the inhuman orbs of his eyes, swirling with gold, silver and blue energy. Jason turned to Farrah.

"We need to move," Jason said and Farrah nodded.

"I'll help Erika gather the others up," Farrah said. "Pick an evacuation point and open a portal. I don't think your spirit vault will be very welcoming right now."

As with the transformation zone, Jason had scouted out several potential portal destinations before arriving in Venice. The vampire-controlled city was always potentially dangerous.

"I'll have you take them," Jason said. "I'm going to scout out this ghoulish conversion operation and record it. We can pass it along to the magical factions so they know what's happening."

"Then we do it together," Farrah said. "I've confirmed that there are two gold-rank vampires in this city and it'll take days to charge up the mana lamp, even with the vortex accumulator on the cloud boat sucking in magic to feed it. Even after we took my new bracelet up to silver-rank yesterday, if they find us it will be life and death."

Jason opened his mouth to protest, then stopped. He used a meditative technique to calm his mind and disperse the rat's nest of panic, rage, fear and disorder in his mind. Erika looked at him quizzically as he stood there, eyes closed and not moving. She looked at Farrah, who motioned her not to say anything. Finally, Jason opened his eyes again.

"Dawn isn't here to tell me not to do something stupid," he said. "I have you, Farrah, but you'll just help me do it better. We need to be our own voices of caution, now."

"Meaning?" Farrah asked.

"There will be another day for vampires, and moving forward from the back foot isn't smart. We all get out of here together."

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Jason sent his family through a portal and started absorbing the cloud boat back into the flask. As that was happening, a silver-rank vampire arrived to investigate the aura burst it had sensed, with a trio of bronze-rank vampires in tow. None escaped to report and Jason left through the portal.

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After relocating to Morocco, Jason sent word to all the factions of what the vampires were doing. Africa itself was largely vampire-free but it was also a stronghold for other elements of the Cabal, so Jason and Farrah didn't let their guards down.

Jason was unhappy, their location a reminder of his last visit. His family had come to meet him after his world-spanning trip and they enjoyed a normal holiday together. It was not too long before the grid went down, making them the last days of planet Earth's old normal.

Jason gave his family space as they were growing increasingly distant. His strange eyes and savage aura burst had made them understand he was no longer human more effectively than telling them over and over ever had.

Emi's skittishness around him was like a knife to the heart. She had only ever experienced the benevolent aspect of his aura until his nightmare flashed the aggressive side of it. She hadn't been harmed but she was deeply affected.

Jason had set up the cloud palace in the form of a sprawling but abandoned desert compound, far from anywhere. It gave his family all the space they needed. In the meantime, he worked on what would have to be his new methodology for finding the right nodes to repair.

He started by absorbing the item Dawn had given him, that looked like a model bridge in a bottle.

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Item: [Firmament Bridge] (transcendent rank, legendary)

???. (???, ??).

➤ Effect: ???.

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Before absorbing it, he examined it with every tool of astral magic knowledge at his disposal, which was quite a lot at his current stage. Between Dawn's tutoring, the books from the goddess of Knowledge, covered in Clive's insightful notes and his increasingly intrinsic understanding of astral forces, those tools were quite formidable.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Dawn. It was that he knew that she didn't tell him everything and the entity she served was an unknowable enigma. She was also likely to do what she felt was in his best interests, over what he might choose for himself.

Nothing he could detect told him anything was wrong with the item. In fact, under the scrutiny of his examination, the information window for it went from a bundle of question marks to a full reveal.

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Item: [Firmament Bridge] (transcendent rank, legendary)

*An item designed to establish reality bridges across the astral, connecting worlds. (crafting material, manifest ephemera).*

- Effect: Used in the creation of specific astral constructs.
- Your soul's absorption of the [Fundament Gate], your gestalt physical/spiritual nature and your [Spirit Domain] ability allow you to incorporate this item into your spirit vault. Doing so will purge the World-Phoenix's influence and the item's base effect, instead, altering your abilities.
- This item's impact on your abilities will be diminished due to your rank being lower than that of the item. The effect will further increase as your rank increases.
- Once incorporated, this object cannot be removed or made use of by anyone else. Incorporating this item into your spirit vault will affect the following abilities:
- [Dark Rider]: Your familiar will be able to take the form of an astral vessel. Prior to reaching diamond rank, this vessel will not have any means of self-propulsion and can only follow astral channels.
- [Path of Shadows]: The maximum distance of your teleportation effects is increased and your teleportation effects are harder to interfere with. You can manipulate node space to anchor an astral bridge between two worlds. This ability effect can be used a single time and requires anchors to be established in the node space of each world individually. Once the bridge is established, it will slowly transmute from an astral channel to a permanent material bridge. This bridge will have a stabilising and restorative effect on the dimensional membrane of both worlds.
- [Hegemon]: Once the ability to create a bridge has been used, the power driving that effect will transmute, enhancing your ability to sense, manipulate and attack objects and individuals related to the Builder using your aura.

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In his cloud palace, Jason absorbed the item as Farrah stood by. He felt its connection to the power of the magic door he had absorbed, felt it become part of him. His understanding of the astral took another firm step forward.

"How is it?" Farrah asked.

Jason opened a portal. Instead of the usual darkness, it had the same transcendent light as his eyes.

"It feels good."

## Chapter 429

### Less Freud and More God of Healing

Jason emerged from a node space portal, satisfied with the results. He opened a regular portal and returned to the cloud palace, still masquerading as desert ruins.

“How was it?” Farrah asked as they sat down, looking out over the desert.

“I’m pretty sure it’s going to work,” Jason said. “Rather than unreliably triangulating locations in node space through proto-spaces, doing it directly through node space is going to work much better. We could have saved ourselves months if I had understood enough to make that work.”

“Even Dawn didn’t have that kind of knowledge,” Farrah pointed out. “At this point, you probably understand the underlying makeup of physical realities better than anyone who isn’t a servant of the Builder.”

“It’s a big cosmos,” Jason said. “For all we know, there are people like us dealing with the same problems in thousands of other universes. It feels like the great astral beings are focused on us, but we’re probably just grains of sand on the beach they’re walking along. Who knows how many places they’re playing off against one another?”

“That’s a little depressing,” Farrah said. “That we’re so irrelevant in the scale of the cosmos.”

“I kind of like it,” Jason said, casting his gaze over the empty blue sky. “It means that all that really matters is what we decide matters to us. We can let all the petty crap fall away.”

“Letting the petty crap fall away isn’t traditionally your strong suit,” Farrah pointed out. Jason flashed a grin.

“Maybe it should be,” he said. “Speaking of petty crap, what did you do with that vampire we caught before I went off to Slovakia?”

“Well, we beat the crap out of him, so he quite desperately needed to feed. But he eats people and we didn’t feed him any. Also, he would have needed blood enhanced by reality core energy anyway. He died, so I weighted him down and dropped him in the ocean.”

“After I’ve knocked the kinks out of this new node-tracking methodology, we should take another run at some vampires. Maybe even go back to Venice, record everything. Did you contact the Network about what the vampires are doing?”

“Yeah, I sent word to Anna back in Australia. She’s passing it on to the other factions but she asked if we could get some solid evidence. There’s not a lot of trust going around,

so it'll take a push to get the other factions to ally against the vampires. She agrees that it would be best if that push isn't the populations of Europe and South America being turned into undead monsters."

"Our concern is getting access to reality cores and maybe that blood. Draining a vampire to increase my abilities isn't a bad idea, but if I can use that energy to accelerate my work, that's even better."

Jason had a decent collection of the depleted unstable genesis cores, which had been transformed into genesis reclamation cores.

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Item: [Genesis Reclamation Core] (transcendent rank, legendary)

*A magical vessel capable of reclaiming the energy of unseated reality cores (consumable, magic core).*

- **Effect:** Can drain the energy from unseated reality cores, as well as individuals and objects that have consumed that energy. When completely charged, this item will transmute into a [Regenesis Core].

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Jason still didn't know what the regenesis core would do, but he had hopes that it would help him repair the link between worlds. Another possibility was that they could be used to replace reality cores that had been plucked out of transformation zones, rectifying some of the damage.

Transformation zones were already the sites of the highest magical levels on Earth. On most of the planet, the increased magical density had stabilised at a point lower than even Greenstone in the other world. The monster manifestations were lesser or iron rank, with the very occasional bronze. Transformation zones were turning into hotspots of heightened magical density, with mostly bronze but also silver-rank manifestations. There were even transformation zones where the magical density had yet to settle into its peak, leading to concerns of gold-rank manifestations.

The one good thing about the changes to the world's ambient magic was that the vampires had become wary of transformation zones. The Cabal had largely taken over those zones, once the fighting over the reality cores was done, but heightened magic meant that the sunlight there had become increasingly harmful to vampires. They were forced to relocate into lower-magic zones.

"How are the others?" Jason asked. He was continuing to give his family space after spooking them.

"They've been discussing potentially going back to Asano Village."

Jason nodded, sadly.



“They don’t trust me anymore.”

“It’s not that they don’t trust you,” Farrah said. “They just don’t understand what you’re going through and how that’s affecting your behaviour.”

“I’m not entirely sure that I do,” Jason said.

“There’s a transition that happens somewhere around silver and gold rank as your perspective undergoes a fundamental shift. You can feel yourself becoming more a part of the magic that permeates the world. Your power reaches heights that make you a living force of authority. You start thinking more like someone who is going to live for centuries, rather than decades. At least, some do. From what I’ve seen, those in your world don’t go through this. Not as early, at least. I think it’s because they’re weak, and it’s usually the strong who go through it at silver.”

“It’s psychological,” Jason said. “It makes sense that different cultures go through different versions of what you’re describing.”

“In my world, they call it the immortal mindset.”

“It doesn’t feel like I’m thinking as an immortal,” Jason said. “It feels like I’m still making the same impulse decisions that have cost me in the past.”

“You could have maybe been less antagonistic with the Builder guy who killed you. Then maybe he wouldn’t have.”

“The Builder sabotaged both our worlds, Farrah. You expect me to play nice?”

“To stop yourself from getting killed by diamond-rankers, yes. And don’t expect me to believe that his role in messing up the world is enough to act the way you did.”

“You don’t know how I acted.”

“Yeah, Jason. I do.”

He nodded his acknowledgement, remaining silent for a moment.

“He tried to take my soul,” he whispered. “I don’t remember it, but I feel it. A power so vast there isn’t a word that encapsulates the magnitude of it. Shivering like I was naked in a storm, knowing nothing except that if I gave in, I lost everything.”

He touched the scar on his chin that cut a line through his neatly-trimmed beard.

“I won’t ever take a step back from the Builder. I can’t. Standing against it is engraved on my soul as much as the scars that fight left behind.”

Farrah stared at him without saying anything.

“What?” he asked.

“I need more women friends,” she said grumpily, getting to her feet. “Men are willing to melodrama themselves to death.”

Jason watched her leave.

“Was that melodramatic?” Jason asked.

“I thought it was fine,” Shade said.

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Erika left Emi playing a board game with her father, part of the extensive collection Greg had bequeathed them following his death. She took a walk, in and out of the buildings, taking in the strange dichotomy of the cloud palace. The outdoor areas were every part of the abandoned buildings of faded stone, seemingly having been there for decades, if not centuries. Inside were the soft textures and fairy tale colours of the magical building made of clouds.

The building was a reflection of the bizarre life she and her family now lived. They were hiding in ruins in Africa and before that was a superyacht in Venice and before that, her brother’s own soul. The world had transformed in the last couple of years and timing with Jason’s return stuck in her mind, even if she knew it wasn’t fair.

She had no doubts that Jason did his best for them, keeping them safe even as much of the world fell into misery, death and despair. That didn’t make their situation easy, though. As days, weeks and months passed, it felt increasingly like they were watching the end times via internet news sites.

“I told you,” Jason said from right behind her and she started.

“I’m going to put a bell on you, sneaking up on people like you’re bloody Batman,” she said, turning around to face him.

“I kind of am Batman,” he said.

“You’re Punisher if he were the Sorcerer Supreme at best. Also, kind of a dick.”

“Hurtful.”

“What did you tell me?” she asked.

“That you would reconsider going to the other world.”

“Have you been having Shade eavesdrop on us?”

“Yes, but he only says anything if there’s a threat. Farrah told me.”

Erika bowed her head.

“We don’t want to seem ungrateful, Jason. It seemed like an adventure, back then. Now the world feels like its collapsing around us.”

“It is.”

She raised her head to meet Jason’s gaze.

“I look at you and I don’t see my brother in your eyes anymore.”

“It’s a superficial change, Eri.”

“I know. But you know that the eyes are a huge part of how we read people, and now you read as alien. I think you’re underestimating how unnerving those eyes are. You look like you’re just a vessel filled with magical stuff.”

“I am.”

“You aren’t making this any easier.”

“I’m not apologising for who or what I am, Eri. It’s up to you to decide whether to accept it or not.”

“Jason, it’s not like that.”

“It’s alright, Eri. I live a strange life and I have to be strange to live it. You can love me and still not want to be part of that.”

“No, Jason. We’re not trying to push you away. I’m not Mum. We just need some time to come to grips with things. For all the things you have to face, you’re going out there and facing them. You at least get to act, to take your fate into your own hands. We’re left hiding away, waiting for one storm after another to pass.”

She leaned forward, resting her forehead on his chest.

“We’re not going anywhere,” she said. “We were just scared and talking. We don’t want to go back to Australia and we still want to go with you. At this point, is it any more dangerous than here?”

Jason wrapped an arm around his sister.

“Sure,” he said. “But standing next to me might not be as bad there as it is here.”

“You got taller again,” she said, pulling him into a hug and resting her cheek against his shoulder.

“That was ages ago, when I ranked up. If you hugged your little brother more, you’d have already noticed. How’s Emi doing?”

“She’s scared and confused, Jason. I know she seems more mature than either of us, sometimes, but she’s barely a teenager. For some bizarre reason, she’s always looked up to you and you’re not just Uncle Jason anymore. She sees things. On the news. We all do, and a lot of it is not flattering.”

“I was never a good role model, even before propaganda started flinging back and forth.”

“No, you were rubbish.”

“You didn’t have to agree quite so emphatically.”

“Jason, she’s still figuring who she is and who she’s going to be. You’re a big part of that, and it’s not just the news that’s unnerving her. The changes she sees in you are

throwing her off much more than the rest of us and, to be honest Jason, we're all a little worried. I don't suppose you know a good therapist in the other world?"

Jason laughed.

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"Seriously?"

"You saw her in my recordings. My friend Rufus' Mum. Ask Farrah; she'll tell you. She probably really can help Emi adjust over there. She helped me in that dark period you saw in the recordings after my first run-in with the Builder."

"They actually have therapists?"

"They're less Freud and more god of healing, but yeah."

Erika let him go.

"So, what next?" she asked.

"The end is closer than I thought," Jason said. "I can do what I need to do faster than before and I don't think I'll be here to see the vampire war through."

"How are we having a serious conversation that includes the phrase vampire war?" she asked and Jason laughed.

"Strange days," Jason said casually. "That's the Earth's fight, not mine, but I'll do my part before I go. Infiltrate a vampire monster factory; maybe stop them from turning someplace into a wasteland of the dead. I've seen enough of those. If I can show off what they're trying to do, maybe people will stop fighting each other and see the threat that faces us all."

"That's not historically a strong bet for the human race," Farrah said.

"No, but I'll do what I can, steal some magic universe rocks while I'm at it and save the world. Again."

"Did you really save the world?"

"I really did," he said with a weary smile. "You know, when Dawn first told me I had to save the world, I thought it would be this awesome adventure."

"But it wasn't?"

He flashed a grin.

"Are you kidding? I was shooting werewolves and trolls with a steampunk minigun. It was the most awesomest thing that ever happened."

## Chapter 430

### Little Cost in Exploring

Jason's spirit domain was a small city in western Slovakia. In the month since the dome around it came down, several gold-rankers had been exploring it, going in and searching, only to leave when the hostile effects applied to intruders grew dangerous. They would break into houses, smash their way into the pagoda and even dig up the ground in search of buried secrets.

The buildings, being made of mutable cloud-stuff, would restore themselves promptly, but the streets and parks were left looking like they had been subjected to a bombing campaign. After arriving in the pagoda via portal, Jason took a look from the top floor balcony and was unhappy with what he saw. Erika and Farrah were with him while the rest of the family trailed behind Emi as she rushed off to explore.

"I knew it would happen," Jason said looking out at the destruction. "Doesn't mean I like it."

"It's like something from a Disney movie," Erika said. "Except someone blew it up. Are those all cloud houses?"

"Yep," Jason said. "It's why they're still intact, or they'd look as bombed out as everything else. What did they think? That I buried a bunch of reality cores like pirate treasure?"

"That's exactly what they thought," Farrah said. "Are they still coming to look around?"

"No," Jason said. He was always able to sense people within his spirit domain, even from across the world. "They tried to ransack the place but didn't find anything. After that, they started taking stuff, from the footpath tiles to whole trees, to magically examine. Cloud-stuff from the houses, too, but that just dissolves on them. You can see their camps set up, just outside the town limits, but they're silver-rankers at most. The EOA and the Cabal have buggered off entirely."

"They wouldn't be able to keep any real number of gold-rankers occupied on fruitless searching," Farrah said. "The proto-spaces may have stopped but the transformation zones are still appearing."

"What about vampires?" Erika asked.

"The magic here is too strong," Jason said. "They could only come at night, and with the attention on this place, operating here is a risk. Slovakia isn't one of their strongholds; it's one of the few places in Europe where the Network continues to hold sway."

Europe was increasingly being overtaken by vampire rule, with much of the continent's broadcast media having gone dark. The information coming out online was mostly from private individuals, depicting the formation of a bloody dystopia. The world had become aware that the vampires were up to something, but how many believed the warnings they had spread through the Network, Jason and Farrah were uncertain of.

Jason had been refining his methodology of identifying nodes for repair while Farrah collated information being released online to choose an appropriate target for infiltration and exposure. They dismissed Venice, worried that their earlier presence would have left the vampires there on higher alert. While they were at work on this, they were contacted and asked for a meeting.

Jason and Farrah's old contacts in the Australian Network branches were now operating under the Global Defence Network moniker, incorporating disgruntled members of the Network, the EOA and the Cabal together. Annabeth Tilden had been asked to be a go-between to arrange a meeting and reached out to Farrah. Jason's spirit domain was selected for a location to make Jason and Farrah feel secure enough to agree.

"They won't arrive until after dark," Jason said. "Let's grab the others and take a tour."

"I would have like to see it in its original state," Erika said sadly.

"It's fine," Jason said. "This is just the outer area. They can't touch the true domain."

"The astral space," Farrah said.

"Shall we take a look?"

They rode the elevating platform down to the mezzanine level, which was an open space overlooking the atrium. It was a garden and lounge area with couches and planters centred around a water feature. A channel of water emerged from the wall, bisecting the room and spilling off the edge, into the atrium pool below. The two halves of the room were connected by a pair of small bridges that crossed the channel.

Lining the walls were ten inactive portal arches. Above each archway was a map, floating in the air like a hologram. They depicted a city laid out like a spoked wheel, with a different point marked on each portal's map.

Jason moved to the archway where the very centre of the map was highlighted and with a wave of his arm, the portal filled with gold, silver and blue energy. They all made their way through the portal to emerge into a room that was identical except for only having one portal. Jason led them to an elevating platform that carried them to the top floor.

"This is the astral space?" Farrah said. "It seems almost identical to where we left."

"The arrival pagoda is the same," Jason said. "You'll see the differences in a moment."

As with the original pagoda, the top floor was a private residence. Jason guided them out to the balcony, where they could see into the surrounding areas. An industrial city of brass, steel and a strange but beautiful blue metal, it had neatly cobbled streets and towering buildings. Unlike Jason's cloud house town where the pagoda loomed over everything, the pagoda here was dwarfed by buildings that turned the street below into a canyon.

After leaving the others to crowd the balustrade and gawk, Jason prompted Shade. Darkness came pouring out of Jason's shadow to form a large cloud, floating over the balcony. As it coalesced, Jason gestured at the balustrade, which sank into the floor. The dark cloud took the form of a dirigible, docked at the balcony.

"Uh, Jason," Erika said, looking up at the vehicle.

"Pretty sweet, yeah?" he said.

"Totally," Emi said, rushing in through the open door.

Jason had been turning on all the cool uncle taps in the last few weeks. It hadn't restored their previous closeness, but she was, at least, less ill at ease around him

"Good job, Shade," Jason said.

"Thank you, Mr Asano," Shade's voice came from Jason's shadow.

"Jason," Erika said. "You realise that floating around in a giant black zeppelin is proper bad guy behaviour, right?"

"It's fine," Jason said.

"I mean, proper villainous," Erika insisted.

"It's a delightful passenger craft on which to spend a carefree afternoon with my family."

"It's practically a volcano lair. Next, you'll be building a space station in the shape of your own head."

"Huh," Jason said thoughtfully. "Shade, do you have enough bodies to swing something like that?"

"No."

"I can't wait for gold-rank. I need to start eating vampires."

"What?" Erika asked.

"I mean training super hard."

Erika shook her head as she made her way aboard, mumbling.

"Giant black zeppelin, bloody hell..."

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The interior of the dirigible was akin to a luxury passenger train built entirely from black materials. Emi and Erika started referring to it as the Bat-Zeppelin. From the observation windows, they were able to look out at the astral space as the dirigible rose into the sky.

As the map had depicted, the city looked like a wagon wheel from the sky. In the centre was the main city, a solid circle of steel and brass towers. From there, long strips of urbanised area extended out in all directions through forested and pastoral land until they reached a circle of city that ringed the forest, the low, grassy hills and the city at the centre of it all. Then the spokes continued outwards until they reached a final circle of urbanised area that enclosed all of the rest.

Outside of the city centre, the buildings were not so large and were more residential, based on the look of them. They maintained the semi-industrial, steampunk feel of the central city, while also incorporating things like parks and gardens.

The spokes and rings of the city created large but enclosed pockets of woodlands and pastoral ideal. Everywhere the city bordered a non-urbanised area, fifteen-metre walls of brick and metal protected the city. Placed along the top of the walls were automated turrets with rotary guns similar to the minigun Jason had used in the transformation zone. These shot conjured bullets rather than unstable reality creation energy.

“Look, there’s cottages,” Emi pointed out as they flew over one of the pastoral zones. “They look adorable.”

“Treehouses, too, but they’re tricky to spot,” Jason said. “I’ll show you later. These areas are subject to monster manifestations, though, so only powerful essence users could live out there.”

The general design of the city, viewed from the air, was similar to a spoked wheel. Beyond the outer ring that was the edge of the city was more wilderness. Wild forest and windswept highlands extended off to the horizon.

“How big is it?” Erika marvelled.

“Astral spaces go a bit funny around the edges, especially the big ones,” Farrah said. “The concept of space becomes a bit wonky.”

Even Jason couldn’t be certain of the astral space’s extent. Beyond a certain point, astral forces intruded and made reality an uncertain place to be. His mind drifted to the giant, alien shapes he had seen in the distant regions of the transformation zone. He couldn’t help but wonder if they were still out there, hiding in the distant reaches of the astral space.



“There’s about seven hundred kilometres in each direction from the city you’d be fine to roam around in before things started getting weird,” Jason said. “So long as you don’t mind the chance of bumping into monsters. The central city is about eighteen kilometres across, while the outer ring is about a hundred and sixty kilometres.”

“There are monsters here?” Emi asked.

“Just one little pack of bronze ranks, thus far,” Jason said, and then pointed. “They’re over that way.”

“You know where they are?” Erika asked.

“This is my domain,” Jason said. “Until you reach the outskirts Farrah just mentioned, nothing can hide from me here. Also, inside the city is safe. Shade, take us down for a closer look at the walls.”

“Those guns are the kind of things the gold-rankers were looking for,” Farrah said.

“Yep, but they’re not getting into the astral space. The apertures – the archways in the pagoda – are sealed unless I open them. A seal can be cracked, given enough time, but time is something you don’t get when your flesh is…”

He glanced at Emi.

“...just fine but you feel compelled to leave for undisclosed reasons.”

“They probably tried, though, right?” Farrah asked. “Breaking in?”

“Oh, yeah, but the portals are part of the pagoda, which is a cloud construct. Every time they tried to set out ritual materials to break in, the building absorbed them and stashed them in the vault. They smashed their way in and took them back, but it was still pretty funny.”

“The building can act on its own like that?” Farrah asked.

“No, I had to control it.”

“From Africa?” Erika asked.

“This is my domain,” Jason said. “I could control it from Mars.”

The dirigible had dropped low, close to the walls.

“Are those train tracks running along the top of the wall?” Emi asked.

“Good eye, young miss,” Jason said. “There’s a train system that runs through the city and around the inner and outer rings, connecting everything. There’s another track that runs inside the wall, so trains can pass one another by. It’s pretty cool.”

“And there are no people in this place at all?” Yumi asked.

Jason’s Grandmother now looked as young as Jason himself after recently monster-coring her way to bronze rank. She was the opposite of Jason, rarely speaking but always watching and listening. When she did talk, people listened.

“I considered moving the family here,” Jason said. “They would be safer once they were.”

“Impractical,” Yumi said. “Getting them here would be one thing, but hardly the biggest hurdle. You said that anyone with hostile intent would encounter the defences of the town outside, did you not?”

“I did,” Jason said.

“There are members of the family who do not like what has happened to it since magic was revealed. People not given essences who feel entitled to them. People who claim the village itself was a bad idea and that we should have gone to Sydney, yet will not leave the village themselves. People who are spying on their own family for outsiders.”

Yumi glanced at Emi, then back at Jason.

“People who think you are an inhuman monster.”

Jason resisted the urge to point out that he wasn't human and his body was, essentially, that of a monster.

“Every family has its petty and ungracious members,” Yumi continued. “Ignoring them at a barbecue is one thing, but bringing them here is another, even if you can spare them from the attacks this place would levy on them. Then there's the fact that they would be in this huge, empty city all alone.”

Shade returned them to the pagoda and Jason led them to an underground train station beneath it. Shade served as train operator, leading it through tunnels and along walls and elevated tracks. Being inside the city made the eerie emptiness of it unnervingly clear.

“How many people could live here?” Emi asked.

“Not sure,” Jason said. “I'd have to survey all the residences.”

“It seems sad to just leave it empty like this,” Emi said.

“If you know a large, friendly population, let me know,” Jason joked.

“What about the transformed people?” Emi suggested.

“The people caught in the transformation zones?” Jason asked.

“Yeah,” Emi said. “They were all turned into elves and goblins and fairies, so why not let them live in a magic city?”

“They've been getting a rough shake,” Erika said. “Rounded up into camps, forcibly recruited by different magical factions.”

“Ah, crap,” Jason said. “The Network taking them on was something I suggested.”

“At least those people are getting essences and some power, even if they’re under heavy restrictions,” Erika said. “The rumours coming out of Russia and China are bad, and plenty of other places are confirmed as being just as harsh.”

“I was hoping that wouldn’t happen,” Jason said. “Of course, I always thought it would.”

“That kind of thing isn’t practical, Sweetie,” Erika told her daughter.

“Why not?” Emi asked. “Uncle Jason could make a big announcement that any of them who want to come can come. Any of them looking to cause trouble would get turned back. He could make it seem like anyone who didn’t let them go were being tyrants, which they are. It wouldn’t work everywhere, but in some places, it would.”

“It’s not an idea without merit,” Emi’s father, Ian, said.

“And if the nations of the world think that Jason is attempting to build a magical army?” Yumi asked. “It could just heighten the oppression those poor people are under.”

“Just give them something,” Emi said. “They’re all after uncle Jason for one thing or another. Why not just give them something they want in return for a bunch of people they don’t?”

“I don’t hate the idea,” Jason said. “There are complications, though. It would take lengthy negotiations, hammering out deals.”

“It doesn’t have to be you,” Erika pointed out. “Craig Vermillion has been dealing with magical politics longer than Grandmother has been alive. Get some people you trust to hold discussions while you go off saving the world.”

Jason turned to his grandmother.

“What do you think?”

“There is little cost in exploring the idea,” she said. “A practical solution will not come quickly or easily, however. Your involvement will need to be minimal.”

“Providing the venue and shiny trinkets to sell the natives.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll think about it,” Jason said. “Shade, turn us around. It’s time we got back for our meeting.”

## Chapter 431

### Intentions

The transport Helicopter carried eight passengers, descending into what had once been a grassy paddock, close to the Global Defence Network camp.

The helicopter landed and the passengers disembarked. Akari Asano was the first to step out, her eyes panning the landscape. She took in the pastoral surrounds and the city of Nitra in the distance. The research camps set up by the magical factions gave each other a comfortable distance, arrayed around the strange, colourful town she had observed from the air.

Following Akari was Annabeth Tilden, Craig Vermillion and Taika Williams, the helicopter noticeably shifted as Taika's huge bulk exited. Now that he was bronze rank, Taika was still huge but was less rounded and more a mountain of muscle.

With them were four others, one of whom was a representative from the Engineers of Ascension. He went by the name Alexander Clerck and rarely spoke. More imposing was William Spencer, an Englishman who was one of the much-feared ancient vampires. The others were wary of him, especially Vermillion, as the other vampire present.

The last two members of the eight were former members of the EOA. They had been part of the exodus from that organisation when it was revealed to be behind the monster waves, eventually joining the GDN although neither possessed any magic.

One of the pair, Dashiell Bexton, was wearing a white suit and pastel shirt. He was unhappily distracted by what the wet ground had done to his shoes and pants. The other, Adam Cosgrove, was a man in a slightly dishevelled suit who somehow looked like a neater one wouldn't fit him quite right.

As the helicopter loudly wound down, a pair of SUVs came driving towards them from the nearby Global Defence Network camp. It threw mud up from the wet earth as it pulled to a stop and Akari made a horizontal chopping motion with her arm. A wave of force blasted the mud back to spatter over the vehicle saving them from an unexpected mud bath. Their liaison from the GDN stepped from the first SUV and ushered them into the two vehicles before driving them to the GDN's camp, where they were shown into a large prefab building and offered tea and coffee.

"Sorry, I only drink blood," said the vampiric Spencer.

"Tool bag," Vermillion muttered, then gave their liaison a winning smile. "Tea, please. Lots of sugar."

"Most weaker vampires know their place," Spencer said.

“My place involves a power saw and your neck, so you should be happy I’m going with a cup of tea,” Vermillion shot back.

“Craig…” Anna said.

“Anna, once you see me playing nice with a guy who tried to control you through your blood, I’ll be happy to listen.”

“That was one lapse of judgement,” Spencer said, unapologetically.

“Give me a chainsaw and your head will lapse off your neck, you dusty old—”

Taika’s regional municipality of a hand came down on Vermillion’s shoulder.

“We get it, bro: you don’t like him.”

Vermillion seethed but fell silent. They all sat in folding chairs as the liaison briefed them on the situation around the magic town, including the disposition of the Network factions and the known effects of entering it.

"The town's defensive mechanisms seem to be of a type with Asano's powers. We believe he can shield people from them on an individual basis, which we assume is what he will do for you, so you can meet him there without your flesh rotting off your bones."

"You assume?" Spencer asked. "Assume is not a word that engenders confidence."

“Asano hasn’t exactly been open to diplomatic contact,” the liaison said. “We had to import you all from Australia just so he’d meet with anyone.”

“Bro, the Network keeps trying to kidnap him,” Taika said. “They even succeeded a couple of times, even if he does keep escaping immediately.”

“That wasn’t us,” Anna said, getting a flat look from Craig.

“Alright,” she admitted. “It was kind of us the first time.”

“So, how do we proceed?” Spencer asked.

“I would suggest a car,” Shade said, emerging from one of the room’s shadows. “Unfortunately, the road infrastructure has suffered some mishaps while Mr Asano was away.”

Only the man calling himself Alexander Clerck had noticed his presence, but he had made no mention of it. Clerck was masking his own aura to pass himself off as one of EOA’s enhanced humans.

“Shade!” Taika said. “G’day, bro.”

“Good day, Mr Williams. Mr Asano will be happy to learn of your presence. He requests that you all make your way to the pagoda at the centre of the city. He apologises for the condition of the roads but there have been a number of discourteous visitors in his absence.”

“What about the magic that eats people?” Taika asked.

"It only affects those that are hostile to Mr Asano, his domain or any of his existing guests," Shade said. "Those with good intentions have nothing to fear."

"And who decides if someone's intentions are good?" Anna asked.

"They decide for themselves," Shade said. "I am sure the people here can direct you to the pagoda. They have taken quite a thorough look around, as you will no doubt see."

"Can't Asano give us safe passage?" Anna asked.

"He can, but he won't. He is letting your good intentions be the shibboleth."

Shade turned to Spencer.

"Why is there an ancient vampire amongst you?"

"He's working with us," Anna said. "Is that a problem?"

"On the contrary," Shade said. "Mr Asano's last ancient vampire spoiled while he was here dealing with the transformation zone. He has been looking for a fresh one."

The rest of the group turned to look at Spencer as Shade vanished back into the shadows.

"Is it just me, or did Shade seem kind of passive-aggressive?" Vermillion asked.

"It felt a little more like regular aggressive to me," Spencer said.

Vermillion turned to the liaison. "What exactly did your people do?"

"They're your people too, now, Craig," Anna said.

"That's what I'm worried about," Craig said. "It's like you're trying to make him mad."

"Those were other branches and other Network factions," Anna said.

"Don't worry, Jason," Craig said. "That wasn't our Network that tried to kidnap you. Again. And kept your friend in a hole and tortured her for weeks. That was a different Network. Oh, the difference? Well, we don't like that other Network very much. I mean, yes, we work with them a bit, when we have to. Otherwise, how are we going to get those reality cores you told us not to take? What? Killed your brother, your friend and your girlfriend? That definitely wasn't us. I mean, yes, it was the Network, but there are degrees of separation..."

"That's enough, Craig," Anna said.

"Is it?" Craig asked. "The guy built a magic town that eats people and we keep doing things that make him angry. And now we're going into that town?"

"You think this is news to me?" Anna asked.

"Do you remember what he was like when he first got here?" Craig asked.

"Yes, Craig. He went to where my wife works. He showed up in my kitchen in the middle of the night."

"You should be grateful that's all he did," Craig said. "I had to stop him from fighting an EOA collection team in the middle of a café. You may recall what he did next from the news. A rolling gunfight in the middle of traffic? He came back to this world as a naked blade whose first instinct was to cut anything put in front of him. His family calmed him down but then we went and killed one of them, as part of what appears to be a campaign of methodically convincing him to massacre us all with his apocalypse butterflies."

"Your point is taken," Anna said.

"Really?" Craig asked. "I'm pretty sure that every time the Network screwed him over and he let it slide because they're the ones fighting the monsters, someone would have said the point was taken. How far do you think we can push before Jason takes that point and impales us all on it?"

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The group of eight were in the back of a flatbed utility vehicle as they approached the edge of the town. After the ute slowed down and stopped, the liaison got out of the cab.

"This is as far as I go," he told the people on the back. "One of you will need to drive the rest of the way. The car is heavy-duty enough that you should be able to handle any terrain issues. If any of you feel like something is wrong, like you're trespassing, trust that instinct and turn back. If you ignore it, you won't like the results."

Another person from the camp rode up on a quad bike, which the liaison climbed onto and they rode away. The eight people left behind stood up in the back of the ute to look at where the gravel track turned to asphalt as it entered the town. Large portions of the road, along with footpaths and garden had been violently ripped up, making what should have been easy navigation more treacherous.

"Anna," Craig said. "Explain to me again how we aren't actively trying to piss Jason off. Or will you need to concentrate on driving us through his town that we dug up like a pack of malevolent monster moles?"

Anna grimaced, not responding as she dropped off the side of the tray.

"If anyone needs to go back, just tap on the cab window," she said, then climbed into the driver's seat and shut the door. She started up the ute and drove it carefully into the town, avoiding road hazards.

The passengers tensed as they passed into the town and immediately encountered Jason's aura. For Craig, Taika and Akari it felt benevolent, while the others felt more oppressed. None of them experienced the sense of trespass that the liaison described.

Alexander Clerck looked around, curiously.

"Oh dear," he muttered to himself. "She's not going to be happy about this."

This drew attention as the man had been all but mute through the entire journey from Australia.

“Something to share with the group?” Akari asked him. She, like the others, didn’t trust the EOA representative amongst them.

“I was just marvelling at what Mr Asano has accomplished here. He’s rather jumped the gun, however, and this will draw attention I hope he’s ready to endure.”

“What kind of people has he drawn the attention of?” Taika asked.

“I never said they were people,” Clerck said.

Akari narrowed her eyes at Clerck.

“You know Jason,” she said.

“We met once, briefly. I helped him find something he was looking for.”

“You didn’t tell us that,” Akari said.

“It was less complicated, this way.”

“It doesn’t make us any more inclined to trust you.”

“You don’t need to trust me. This place knows my intentions.”

“Unless you can fool it.”

“Nothing can hide its intent, here, no matter how powerful,” Clerck said.

“So you say,” Akari said. “Jason has enemies outside this world with power beyond imagining.”

“You speak of gods and beyond? Such entities cannot send their avatars into this place.”

“You expect me to believe this place is powerful enough to fend off gods?” Akari asked.

“Believe what you like,” Clerck said. “It is not a matter of power, but of nature. A god cannot walk into this place any more than you can blink my eyes.”

“What does that mean?” Taika asked.

“It means that there are higher rules for higher beings,” Clerck said. “What is impossible for us is negligible to them, while the same can be true for them and us, despite their power. We can enter this place, while they cannot.”

“Who are you?” Adam Cosgrove asked. He was not a magical being and had been keeping his mouth closed and his ears open around the incredibly powerful company he was in. He was both a former detective and a former EOA member, though, and his instincts told him that Clerck was more dangerous than the fourteenth-century vampire he was sitting next to.



"That will be clear soon enough," Clerck said. "For now, I will reiterate that if this place does not reject me, then you can be assured that my intentions are not hostile, whatever my agenda may be."

"Should we kick him out here?" Taika asked.

"If Asano's familiar didn't see fit to reject me, why should you?" Clerck asked.

"Shade knows who you really are?" Taika asked

"As I said: I have met Mr Asano once before."

## Chapter 432

### I Need That Song to Play Out

The ute pulled up a little way from the pagoda, due to the level of destruction around it. The gold-rankers trying to dig up any treasures had focused on the pagoda itself, the area around it looking less like an urban street than a motocross arena.

Vermillion continued his discontented mumbling as he hopped out of the tray, while Anna got out of the cab, looking around. She was concerned that Vermillion may well be right about Jason's general receptiveness. She led the group in picking their way between the gaping holes and mounds of earth to reach the pagoda doors, which slid open at their approach.

They stepped into the atrium, their attention caught by the waterfall spilling into the pool in the middle of the floor. Shade was waiting for them.

"This way, please. The conference room is on the second floor."

As they walked down the hall, Dashiell Bexton, one of the two normals in the group, ran his fingers over the wall.

"What is this made of?"

"Clouds," Taika said.

"Clouds?"

"Clouds," Taika confirmed

"How does that work?" Dashiell asked.

"Magic, bro. Are you new?"

Most of the others had been inside cloud constructs before, although it was still an unusual experience. The ancient vampire, Spencer, was particularly unsettled. He came from a time when he was the dominant magical power and this was one more reminder that the world he had woken up in was very different.

They entered a room that, in design, was an ordinary conference room. The colourful cloud-stuff from which everything from the furniture to the walls was made gave it a slightly alien feel, however. One wall was a window looking out over the hacked-up streets.

"Please sit," Shade said. "Mr Asano is on his way."

"Ooh, I missed this," Taika said, settling into a cloud chair.

"This is startlingly comfortable," Dashiell said, turning to the other normal, Adam Cosgrove. "Adam, we should have looked your old friend up a long time ago."

"She's not an old friend," Cosgrove said. "We just helped each other."

“I’d like to think of us as friends,” Erika said as she walked into the room with Jason, Farrah and Yumi. “It’s very nice to see you again, Detective. Sorry, Mr Cosgrove. May I call you Adam?”

“Sure,” Cosgrove said. “It’s nice to see you too, Mrs Asano.”

“It’s Erika, please. Could you ever imagine we’d be here like this, the last time we met in that café?”

“We’re a long way from that day,” Cosgrove said. “The whole world is.”

“Very true,” Jason said, holding out his hand. Cosgrove shook it. “Thank you for helping my sister when no one else would.”

“Our interests happened to align. This is my partner, Dash.”

Jason shook Dashiell’s hand.

“Nice to meet you, mate,” Jason greeted him. “Why are you participating in this?”

“Adam, here, is a goodwill ambassador,” Dashiell said. “I thought it was a bit odd they wanted him just for his connection to your sister until your mate Vermillion started listing off all the stuff they did to you. It sounded like they needed all the goodwill they can get.”

“You’re not wrong,” Jason said. “Never picked up any magic during your time in the EOA?”

“All that human modification stuff sounded a bit iffy to us,” Dashiell said. “We were really in it to peek behind the curtain.”

“They wouldn’t have been accepted anyway,” Alexander Clerck interjected.

“Independent thinkers are always rejected. We want our powered people to be compliant. The process also seems to dampen intellectual creativity, as well. These two were much better as agents.”

“You seem to know a lot about us,” Cosgrove said.

“Because of your connection to Mr Asano, here, tangential as it may be,” Clerck said, turning to Jason with a smile. “And how have you been, Mr Asano.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve been paying attention,” Jason said. “Do they even realise who you are?”

“They’re all suspicious, but I don’t think any of them have figured it out.”

“Why are you here?” Jason asked.

“My organisation wanted to get some information to you. I was aware this meeting was being arranged, so I presented myself to the fine people of the GDN who were organising it. I decided to deliver it in person because, to be honest, I wanted a look around. A spirit domain, Mr Asano? Very presumptuous.”

“Who is this guy?” Taika asked.

“This is Mr North,” Jason said. “First among equals of the EOA, if you’re willing to believe that horse pucky. How are you doing, Taika?”

Taika caught Jason in a big hug.

“All good, bro. You doing alright?”

“Oh, you know. Keeping busy.”

Taika let out a rumbling chuckle.

While Jason and the others greeted Akari warmly, most of the group was staring at Mr North. The revelation of his identity pushed even the presence of the ancient vampire temporarily out of mind.

“What?” Mr North asked innocently.

Jason and his companions joined the rest in sitting around the table.

“Introductions, first,” Jason said. “For those of us who haven’t met, I am Jason Asano.”

“They’ve seen you on TV, bro.”

“This is my sister Erika.”

Jason glanced at Taika.

“You may have seen her on TV too,” Jason continued. “This is Farrah Hurin and my Grandmother, Yumi Asano.”

All eyes went to Yumi, who looked no older than Jason.

“Grandmother?” Dashiell asked.

“It’s just shape-shifting,” Jason explained. “She’s really an old lady.”

Yumi rapped Jason on the arm and he flashed her a grin. The grin faded as he turned back to his guests.

“Now, if someone would care to explain what the head of the EOA and an ancient vampire are doing here, that would be appreciated. I recognise that you haven’t come here with hostile intent, so I’m at least willing to hear you out.”

“It’s about the vampires,” Anna said. “It’s no secret that they are ramping up for a play at global dominance while the opposing magical factions have made less than stellar progress towards unifying against them. You sent us some details of the operations in Venice and this was, as we’ve discovered, only a tertiary program.”

Jason turned to the vampire, Spencer.

“I assume your unexpected presence is to shed some light on this?”

“Yes,” Spencer said. “Not all of the Arisen, as we call ourselves, want to participate in this plan for global dominion. For one thing, vampires are increasingly territorial by instinct as we grow stronger. Working together does not come naturally.”

"Which is most likely why the vampires haven't made a move already," Vermillion said. "The ancient vampires are instinctually competitive with one another while their attitudes cause friction with the non-vampiric portions of the Cabal. The Cabal was always a loose collection of factions and, like the Network, has fragmented. Some have broken off to form a non-vampiric new Cabal, while others have joined the Global Defence Network."

"There are those of us who do not wish to participate at all," Spencer said. "We recognise that the world has changed and that we are no longer the dominant force on it. While most of the Arisen are blind to the new world and the dangers it presents to them, those of us that do see realise that the vampires cannot overcome all the forces arrayed against them. Even if they are scattered now, a common enemy will unite them. The only questions are how long a war takes, how much damage it does and what comes after."

"So, you're looking to stay alive once the vampires as a whole have lost," Jason said.

"Yes," Spencer agreed. "We have no altruism or desire to help humanity. We simply recognise that so long as we are accepted, there will be power and influence for us to hold, even if we are not rulers. I will take some power over death, and there are others amongst the Arisen who have chosen the same. For most, however, they cannot overcome the inherent desire for dominion."

"Well," Jason said. "I'm not going to sit here, in the middle of my personal magic realm and claim that dominion is not intoxicating. I understand that you make for powerful allies, both in personal capability and the information you bring to the table. My question is: what does any of this have to do with me? I'm not opposed to facing off against some vampires when the opportunity appears, but I have larger concerns."

"Larger than a world ruled by vampires and filled with unliving ghouls?" Spencer asked.

"Yes," Jason said, meeting his stare.

"Mr Spencer and... Mr North," Anna said, "have brought critical information to us that warrants action. That is where you come in."

"Oh?" Jason asked, turning to face her.

"Spencer has revealed the location of the vampire's primary logistics operations. They've created a secure location in which they are producing enhanced blood, lesser vampires and ghouls."

"Lesser vampires?" Erika asked.

Jason turned to Vermillion.

"Craig, could you explain the difference, just to make sure everyone is on the right page."

“Sure,” Vermillion said. “At the top of the food chain you’ve got the greater vampires. That’s me and dust-bucket over there. We went through a voluntary process of transformation and started weak, growing stronger over time. You can accelerate that process by drinking powerful blood, but there hasn’t been a lot of that floating around. Also, if you start preying on the Cabal or the essence users, you end up dead, rather than powerful.”

“It was easier in the past, when the Cabal was a series of fractious groups,” Spencer said.

“Probably one of the outside pressures that pushed the Cabal to unite,” Jason surmised.

“Next,” Vermillion continued, “we have the lesser vampires. These are the ones turned against their will. They start with whatever power level they had before being turned, although they lose their original powers. Unlike greater vampires, they do not gain bloodline powers to replace them. They’re also more subject to control by greater vampires.”

“The powers aren’t lost,” Farrah said. “They’re sealed. Lesser vampires are vampires in body, but not in soul. It’s why they can’t grow stronger. It’s also why the process can be reversed if you get to them fast enough.”

“Lastly you have ghouls,” Vermillion said. “These depraved mockeries are what happens when you try and create a lesser vampire that’s stronger than the person you’re trying to turn. Ghouls are harder to wrangle and significantly less intelligent, but if you want greater power from lesser materials, that’s your option. You can make ghouls directly, or turn lesser vampires into ghouls.”

“And that’s what the vampires are doing,” Jason said. “Turning Europe into a factory for ghouls and blood enhanced by reality cores.”

“At first it was of limited concern,” Vermillion said. “Even considering all the newly-appeared Arisen and the existing Cabal, there were only so many greater vampires. There is a cost to creating minions, even for those with the ideal bloodlines, and the scale could only be so big.”

“Those of us preparing to switch sides,” Spencer said, “were gathering information for when we did. Bringing a gift to the table would get us a better seat, after all. We discovered that operations were scaling up to a far greater degree than should be possible.”

“How?” Jason asked.

"We couldn't find out everything before we were forced to make our move as the others grew suspicious," Spencer said. "We discovered two critical factors. One was that there is an alternate means for ghoulish creation, requiring far less from each vampire per ghoulish created. Second was that there is now a method for strengthening lesser vampires. It makes their behaviour more feral and ghoulish-like, but they retain most of their intelligence."

"I've seen the results in Venice," Farrah said.

"Those smaller-scale operations are appearing across Europe," Spencer said. "We couldn't find out how these processes were developed."

"Which is where I come in," Mr North interjected. "I believe you know, Mr Asano, about a joint research operation from decades ago, involving the Cabal, the EOA and the Network."

"It's where you developed the first magically-augmented humans," Jason said.

"Just so. There were many projects involved with that operation, including the animation of the dead."

"Necromancy," Farrah hissed.

"There was a researcher from that operation. We believed he was long dead, until the events at Makassar. We believe he was unable to resist so many dead as a test platform for whatever he has been working on in the intervening..."

Mr North trailed off as he felt pressure bearing down on him. Jason's aura had blended with that of the entire room and was boiling over with fury. Cosgrove and Dashiell opened their mouths in silent screams, while even the more powerful people went off-colour. Only the gold-ranked Spencer and Mr North were able to fend off Jason's aura with their own and even that was a struggle.

"JASON!" Erika yelled and the moment passed. Everyone but Jason slumped in relief, with even Spencer and Mr North having lost their equanimity. The two normal-rankers had fallen out of their chairs and were throwing up on the floor. Jason stood up and walked to the window, looking out with his back to the room.

"I apologise," he said. "I should not have lost control like that."

"No kidding," Mr North said. "There's a reason you aren't meant to have a spirit domain."

Anna tried to get the meeting back on track, despite her pale, bloodless face.

"This man that North is talking about," she said. "Using information given to us by the former Mrs South, the Network has been looking for him since Makassar. We had some indications that he was with the Cabal but that's where we dead-ended."

“Concealing information has long been the Cabal’s greatest strength,” Vermillion said.

“Is this man in France?” Jason asked, still gazing out the window.

“How did you know?” Anna asked.

“Because you would only come to me if you needed something. What can I do that no one else can? I can enter a sealed astral space, like the one in Saint-Étienne where Adrien Barbou sent Farrah.”

“You’re right,” Spencer said. “We never discovered how the process was developed, but we did discover where. After the Arisen took France, the astral space was used as a secure location for the main hub of the operation. That’s where they develop the infrastructure for the satellite operations, as well as produce more empowered lesser vampires, ghouls and enhanced blood than anywhere else. We also believe that they’re stockpiling enhanced blood there, as an emergency reserve.”

“So you want me to go there and put an end to it,” Jason said. “That place is probably crawling with gold-rank vampires.”

“No,” Spencer said. “As I said, we are too territorial. There will only be a few. Two, maybe as many as five. They will likely be stronger than most, though.”

“And you expect me to beat them how?”

“Don’t act like you haven’t already decided to go, Asano,” Mr North said. Jason turned around to face him.

“There’s a price,” Jason said. “I want Adrien Barbou.”

“Revenge, Mr Asano? Aren’t you above that kind of thing? You let Gerling skip off out of your transformation zone.”

“Gerling can fight vampires. Barbou isn’t that strong.”

“It’s my revenge,” Farrah said. “And I’m definitely not above that kind of thing.”

“The answer is no,” Mr North said, not breaking his gaze from Jason. “You’re going to do this because it needs doing, Mr Asano, whether I give you Barbou or not.”

“And what is to stop me from holding you here and melting you in chunks until you give him up? Jason asked.

“The fact that you invited me here in good faith. You are going to let me go because you aren’t willing to be the person who didn’t. Of course, if you prove me wrong, that’s exciting too. I’d be willing to give Barbou up to see that.”

Jason turned his gaze from Mr North, his face twisted in a frustrated snarl. Mr North laughed.



“And there he is. Be wary of your principles, Mr Asano. I might use them to be assured that you enter that astral space, but someone was already playing them like an instrument before I found you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, I’m not going to tell you that. Like the World-Phoenix, I need that song to play out. We all do.”

## Chapter 433

### Wash Them First

Jason didn't ask any more about Mr North's cryptic clues. Unless he was willing to try and torture the information out of him he wouldn't be forthcoming and Jason wasn't ready to take that step. In any case, Mr North seemed to know more about spirit domains than Jason himself and had entered Jason's anyway. To assume the North had not taken precautions would be foolish.

"Will you act on our behalf?" Anna asked.

"No," Jason said. "I'll act on my own."

"You will go to France, though," she clarified.

"Yes. But I want something in return."

"I can't force him to give up Adrien Barbou," Anna said. "We would if we could. We'd quite like to get our hands on him ourselves."

"Anna, don't you dare," Farrah said quietly. "Barbou belongs to me."

"Spicy," Mr North said. "Jason, I like her."

"I've paid the price for running my mouth when I shouldn't, Mr North. It's time for you to go before you learn that lesson for yourself."

"Do you regret it though?" Mr North asked.

"Sometimes the cost of staying silent is worse than the cost of speaking up, whatever that price may be," Jason admitted. "It doesn't make the cost any less real."

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➤ You have designated [Rune Spider (variant)] as hostile.

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Jason gestured at the window and the transparent cloud-stuff dissipated, letting in the breeze.

"You can show yourself out, Mr North; I'm sure you'll find your way. I have more to discuss with Mrs Tilden."

"Very well," Mr North said. "But since you and I are not likely to meet again before you return from the other world, a final piece of advice: don't build your bridge here. Put it somewhere that people aren't going to get hurt."

Mr North leapt out the window, which was restored at an absent gesture from Jason who was contemplating North's departing words. The implications of the insight he continued to demonstrate were troubling but Jason put them aside to concentrate on present issues.

“Anna,” Jason said, turning his inhuman eyes on her. “You want me to do this, and I will. But I want something in return.”

“I told you that Barbou is not within our power to give,” Anna said.

“That’s not what I’m talking about. We’ve been discussing opening this place up to the civilians affected by the transformation zones. A place where they can be safe and welcome.”

Anna looked out the window at the ruined streets.

“Safe?”

“Mr Spencer,” Jason said, turning to the vampire. “I hope that you find equanimity with this world you have come back to after so long. Thank you for coming. I’ll see to the return of the others, so you may take the car if you wish.”

“I’ve been buried under a church since the rule of George the Second,” Spencer pointed out. “I do not know how to drive an automobile. As I am faster than a car, however, I shall make do and walk. Like a peasant. You aren’t going to make me jump out the window as well, are you?”

“Certainly not,” Jason said. “Shade, please escort the gentleman out.”

After Spencer was guided away by Shade, Jason turned his attention back to Anna.

“I have something to show you.”

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“How big is this?” Anna asked as she looked out over the city from Shade’s zeppelin form. As with the world outside the astral space, it was deep into the night and the empty city was a sea of lights. The rest of the group were in the main passenger cabin while Jason and Anna spoke alone in a small observation room.

“The city is large enough that we can take in as many transformed as choose to come,” Jason said. “For the foreseeable future, at least.”

“I don’t have anything like the authority to make something like that happen,” Anna said. “Every country, every magical faction has their own policies and even laws regarding the transformed.”

“I know. It will be a lengthy and complicated process to even begin.”

“You don’t have time for that.”

“Nor the patience. I’m better at spotting politics at work than wading in myself, I’ve discovered. I’m too enamoured of bold moves and more than a little imperious, at times. That’s why I will give my Grandmother the authority to act on my behalf when it comes to administering this place.”

“Then shouldn’t she be in here with us?”

“I haven’t told her yet,” Jason said.

“Are you certain she’ll agree to do that?”

“She will if I threaten to do it myself.”

“The most I can do is start putting you in contact with people. Governments, the UN.”

“I’m not looking for you to get it done. What I want from you is to make sure that this is taken seriously.”

“People take you seriously.”

“This is a different thing.”

“Yes,” Anna agreed. “I’ll do what I can.”

“That’s all anyone can ask,” Jason said.

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After a quick sky tour, the group returned to the pagoda for a social gathering in the mezzanine lounge with Jason and his family. Refreshments were set out, mostly magical fruit collected from the astral space. The forested areas had wild fruits and berries while the pastoral regions featured orchards.

“I’m sorry I never had the chance to introduce your wife to Dawn,” Jason told Anna. “She’s gone off to the other universe.”

“And you will follow?” Anna asked.

“In time. I’m close to securing the stability of Earth, at least in the short term. I need to go to the other side to finish the job. To be honest, I’m more than ready to go. I’m tired, Anna. Tired of nothing but going from one fight to the next. Of always watching my back in case some gold-ranker finds me or the Network betrays me again. You know that I’ll have to check out France to make sure it isn’t some kind of ambush.”

“You really think I would do that?”

“Do you remember the night we met in person?”

“In my kitchen.”

“I’d just escaped a Network kidnap and extraction team, which was not the last time I was kidnapped by the Network.”

“That was the French and American branches.”

“If you hang the Network shingle, you’re responsible for the Network’s actions, Anna. Are you asserting that you’ve never done something you disagreed with because one of your bosses told you to?”

“Of course not.”

“So, yes, Anna. I really think you would do that.”

“I’m sorry that it’s come to that, Jason.”

"I'm past sorry. If I didn't have to stop the world from breaking down like a biscuit in milk, I'd be long gone already. I thought I'd stay and help with the vampires but once I'm done in France, that's as far as I go. I probably wouldn't even go that far if it weren't for the man behind the Makassar undead. I won't let him do that again."

"That's exactly what he wants to do with these ghouls."

"Which is why I'm doing this. Then I'm finishing my task and leaving."

"Will you ever come back?"

"Yes, but not for a long time. You should hope that it's long enough that I'm no longer looking to settle old scores because it will be long enough that I can."

"Speaking of old scores, I have news on Jack Gerling. He's gone rogue."

"Rogue?"

"Since the magic changed, gold-rankers can get by on silver-rank spirit coins now. Thirty a day isn't cheap but it's enough that they no longer need gold coins, let alone reality cores."

"What's he up to?"

"No one knows. From what I've heard, he'd been quietly suborning people for a while and took off with his assistant, a cluster of silver-rankers and a couple of the best ritualists the US had."

"Great," Jason said. "He'll be coming after me, if he isn't already."

"Why?"

"Because, unlike the Network, he hasn't been distracted by vampires and reality cores. Remember why you were kidnapping me in the first place? Before the world blew up, you all wanted my secrets. He still does."

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While the others were meeting and talking, Akari and Jason quietly took a walk outside. They discussed the combat trance that Jason had recently been able to touch on but was as-yet unable to fully use.

"We call it the sword Zen, in my family," Akari said. "Obviously, people not dedicated to the sword call it other things. My father is the expert; I only managed to reach that state at Asano village. After Gerling killed Asya, Kaito and Greg, I went into intensive training with my father and finally managed to achieve it. I'm surprised you were able to, given that mastery of technique is not your central focus."

"I recently had the opportunity for some quite intensive experience with the sword," Jason told her.

"Oh?"

"When this place was still covered in a dome, it sealed the powers of whoever was in here. My sword was all I had, at first, and even as more options became available to me, it remained critical until the end."

"And how much fighting was there?"

"Quite a bit. I only achieved the combat trance at the end, when I was pushed to the absolute limit. I've managed to touch on it since, but only sporadically. Farrah has helped but her combat style is, in many ways, the opposite of mine. It's almost like there's a translation issue."

"I don't have much more experience at this than you," she said. "My father is the expert. If you spent some time with him, it may help you."

"I don't have that time, and I may not go back home for a while. Probably not until right before I leave this world."

"I used to want to go with you," Akari said. "An alien world full of strangeness and adventure."

"But not anymore?"

"My fight is here, now. The vampires are coming sooner, rather than later. You're not the only one standing up to save the world."

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"I really would like to thank you again," Jason said to Cosgrove. They were still in the mezzanine lounge and dawn was starting to poke its head over the horizon. "You may as well all stay for the day. Craig will need to stay inside until it's dark again at least."

"Damn right," the vampiric Vermillion said. "The magic here does bad stuff to the light. I can feel the dawn coming like a chill climbing up my back."

"It's strange meeting you like this, Mr Asano," Cosgrove said. "Your disappearance set me on a strange path. It seems odd, now thinking back on how the cover-up of one little magic event involved so many people. Police, federal police, government. It seems like a lot of effort given that it's all out in the open, now."

"It used to be a lot easier," Vermillion said. "In a world before mass communication and people carrying cameras around in their pockets. The Network's balancing act of keeping everything secret had been close to toppling for a long time."

Vermillion sat a hand on Jason's shoulder.

"Then this guy came along. I won't say he's the one who made them tip over but he definitely added some wobble."

“I’d like to give you something, Mr Cosgrove. Your partner, too, as a gesture of my gratitude. Of course, the concern is that anything I gave you would be confiscated the moment you leave, so it needs to be something you can use here.”

Jason gestured and a portal arch appeared. Two of Shade’s bodies stepped out, each carrying a large duffel bag.

“We’ll have to do it all at once, which isn’t ideal,” Jason said. “It also means that I’ll be picking everything out for you.”

“What are you talking about?” Cosgrove asked.

Shade set the bags on the floor and Jason crouched down to open one. He reached in and took out a cube shining brightly enough that it was hard to look at.

“I’ve picked out two sets,” Jason said. “You can choose between them for yourselves. One is the sun essence, the blood essence and the life essence. It combines into the avatar confluence and is about as perfect an anti-vampire set as you’ll find. The other set are all cheap essences; gun, hand and adept, combining into the master essence.”

“The John Wick special,” Anna said.

Jason put the sun essence back in the bag and closed it.

“If you’re willing, I’ll essence you both up before you go. There’s enough awakening stones in there that we can send you off with a full set of powers. Rushing things like that isn’t ideal, but I’m guessing you former EOA guys are pretty far down the list when it comes to getting resources from the Global Defence Network.”

“No kidding,” Dashiell said. “They say we’re all one big family, but I haven’t seen anyone that didn’t come from the Network originally getting magicked up.”

“It’s not that bad,” Anna said.

“Sure, it’s not,” Dashiell said. “If Adam didn’t know Mrs Asano, do you think we’d be doing anything but scut work?”

“Are you sure about this?” Cosgrove asked Jason. “These are valuable resources.”

“Mate, I’ve got them coming out my arse. Not literally; you won’t have to wash them first.”

## Chapter 434

### The Language of Passion

Jason had been through months of unrelenting pressure, fighting and walking the knife-edge between life and death. He'd even slipped off it, although at least he had come back, unlike Kaito, Greg and Asya.

Taking a day to spend time with friends and family was like opening a release valve. Although the setting was anything but, there was a blessed normalcy to sitting around talking, preparing a big meal together with his sister and niece. It wasn't anything elaborate, since all they had was a lot of fruit and the food they stocked for Emi, who couldn't live on spirit coins. Even so, the process was more important than the result and, with Erika on hand, it still worked out pretty well.

Eventually, night came and Jason opened a portal to the Global Defence Network's camp. Jason had a sense of loss as everyone but Farrah and his family made their farewells and stepped through. He felt the responsibilities he had been able to ignore for a day looming over him once more as his gaze lingered on the portal.

"Jason, are you alright?" Farrah asked.

"I don't have time not to be," he said dismissing the portal with a flicking gesture.

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Jason's father Ken was on a pagoda balcony, looking out over the heavily damaged town. He started slightly as Jason moved next to him, not having heard his son's silent approach.

"Time to go, Dad."

"I think I'd like to stay," Ken said. "I may not be a fighter but my abilities can repair all this damage."

"No," Jason said, his voice soft but unyielding.

"You're worried about our safety."

"Yes," Jason said.

"I don't think anyone wants me, Jason. I can't open the portal to your magic city. I don't know and can't do anything special. I'm not valuable to anyone."

"You're valuable to me. Normally I would let it go but Jack Gerling is out there and he's working towards his own agenda now."

A rare expression of rage crossed Ken's face. Only his wife and the man who killed his son could put it there.



“Gerling has the strength to come in and take you hostage if I’m not here. If you start fixing the town up, he’ll learn that you’re here sooner or later. Once he’s dealt with, I’ll take you up on it.”

Ken placed a hand on Jason’s back.

“Alright, son. You get that prick.”

“You know I’m going to kill him, right? No prison can hold someone like that. Not in this world. Even if there were, the Americans would just step in and take back their errant gold-ranker.”

“I don’t like the idea of killing people,” Ken said. “The world isn’t the way we’d like it to be, though; now more than ever.”

“I know. It feels like the stronger I get, the harder it is to roll the boulder up the hill.”

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Jason’s spirit vault still remained after the ability went through its second evolution to become a spirit domain. It was still a sprawling garden centred on a pavilion but now it was more like a botanical garden that would have been right at home in Jason’s magical Slovakian town. During his periods of turmoil it had gone through inhospitable changes, but now Jason was more settled and he had more active control over the space.

He had been nervous about bringing them into the spirit vault after they’d been living in the cloud boat for several weeks. If they no longer trusted him enough to enter, he wasn’t sure how he would cope. If, deep down, they could no longer accept who and what he’d become, he knew he’d handle it badly, if he could handle it at all.

Fortunately, that was not an issue and they entered Jason’s spirit vault without problems. Whether he always held their trust or if enough time had passed since he scared them with his uncontrolled aura, he would rather not find out.

He chose to wander through his own soul for the first time in a while, under a night sky reflective of the one over his town. Farrah walked alongside him.

“I know I’m not looking forward to going back as much as you are,” he told her. “I just need to not be rushing around, putting out fires.”

“You do remember that we’ll arrive in the middle of the worst monster surge in the history of the world?”

“But that isn’t on me to fix,” Jason said. “I’ll do my part, sure, but I can be just another adventurer.”

Farrah knew it wasn’t the moment to prick a needle into that balloon, so she changed the subject.

“So, France, then,” she said.

"No," Jason said.

"No?"

"How many times do the Network think they can come to us, apologise for the last crappy thing they did and then tell us to solve their problems."

"You told them we'd do this, and we should," Farrah said. "What's waiting in that astral space needs to be stopped."

"Yeah, but we're not doing it their way. Even with the sun lamp, do you think taking on as many as five gold-rank vampires and who knows what else is a smart plan?"

"Of course not. You have a better one?" she asked.

"Germany."

"Germany?"

The ancient vampires had, in general, not taken well to modern technology and what was, to them, its magic-like capabilities. Much of Europe had gone dark as they took down power and communications infrastructure, although their limited knowledge left patchwork pockets of communication in place.

Only a handful of places maintained any level of normalcy. Slovakia was now too high-magic for even powerful vampires to retain their full strength during daylight. In Germany, different Network factions had collaborated to hold the country as a beachhead into Europe for the coming conflict.

"After they stopped digging through my spirit domain, the gold-rank Network people were all withdrawn," Jason said. "The US is focused on clearing out their domestic vampires before the conflict truly begins, while China is wary of Russia, which the Cabal pretty much openly runs, now."

"How does that help us?"

"Gerling was the only gold-ranker permanently stationed in Germany. They got lucky in that the area has a higher than average magic level, so only the strongest vampires can operate in daylight without dropping in strength."

"But now Gerling has gone off on his own," Farrah said.

"Leaving us with a small window before Germany gets reinforced to slip in and take some of what the US and China left behind."

"Which is?"

"Magically enhanced heavy ordnance. It was developed to fight gold-rank monsters but now it's being stockpiled for use against the vampires."

"You want to shoot a missile into the French astral space?"

“Not exactly,” Jason said. “What we’re after is a magically-enhanced SADM. Basically, a nuclear bomb in a backpack. I sneak it into the astral space, set the timer and get out. Preferably without anyone realising I was ever there.”

“You think it will go that smoothly?” Farrah asked.

“No,” Jason said. “A guy can live in hope, though.”

“Are you even sure they have this weapon in Germany?”

“Yep. I’ve had Shade spying on all the Network camps since we got here and they’re all based out of Germany. I know which base to go for and even roughly where on the base to find it.”

“We should be going before we miss our best chance, then,” Farrah pointed out.

“Yeah,” Jason agreed, his voice heavy with reluctance. He cast his head back to look at the starry sky. “It was a nice break, though, wasn’t it?”

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“It seems we aren’t the only ones looking to jump on the Network’s moment of exposure,” Farrah said over voice chat. They were plunging through the dark sky over an airbase lit up below them. With their silver-rank perception, they were able to make out the battle being waged between base personnel and the attacking vampire forces, most of which was made up of bronze-rank ghouls.

The base had the advantage of numbers, with no shortage of essence users, along with regular soldiers armed with magical firearms. The vampires had the advantage in individual strength, however, and the normal soldiers were especially imperilled. Unable to use anything stronger than iron-rank weapons, they were holding through training, discipline and superior numbers, focus-firing the unthinking ghouls.

Jason’s aura senses took in the base and he detected a pair of gold-rank vampires. It was likely that similar attacks were taking place at other Network strongholds in Germany or there would have been more.

“I think the vampire war just started,” Farrah said. “Do we intervene or grab what we came for in the chaos?”

“What do you think?”

“I say we help,” Farrah said. “We can’t do anything about wherever else they’re attacking, but losing Germany would be a huge blow for the side that doesn’t eat people. I’m always ready to kill some vampires. The sun lamp won’t help us at night but all these flunkies will help me charge my bracelet and you to stack up power.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Let’s clear out the riff-raff, then, and let the gold-rankers come to us.”

“We’re really going to take on gold-rank vampires, two-on-two,” Farrah said.

“The person who thinks something is impossible fails before they even start,” Jason told her.

“That person also doesn’t get turned into a beverage for their hubris,” Farrah said.

“Just try not to think about that part.”

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The two gold-rank vampires were hunting the strongest essence users while their forces of lower-rank vampires, lesser vampires and ghouls overran the base. The Network’s silver-rankers had gathered at the edge of the base to form a united front, inflicting enough harm that it took eating them for the vampires to recover.

“The rise of these new magicians in our absence has been a nuisance,” one of the vampires said as he dabbed his mouth with a napkin. “I’m starting to come around on them, though. Their blood is an absolute delight.”

“Yeah, they’re tasty,” the other said, roughly wiping the blood from his face with his sleeve as he tossed aside a loose arm. “Ellie, this is taking too long. The normal humans and their magic weapons are doing far too well against the ghouls. You know what herding ghouls is like and we need to be sealed up in the transports before dawn.”

“My name is Élie, not ‘Ellie.’ I’m not an English peasant girl.”

“Still bitter about the French Revolution? Just be glad you fell into slumber beforehand. Otherwise, those peasants you hate so much might have taken your head, Ellie.”

“Élie!”

“That’s what I said. Ellie.”

“Élie.”

“Isn’t that what I’m saying?”

“No.”

“It feels like that’s what I’m saying. Say it again?”

“Élie.”

“And what am I saying?”

“Ellie.”

“You’re just saying the same thing both times.”

“I hate English so much. Can’t you learn French?”

“Can’t you learn Russian?”

“Why would I want to learn Russian? I already speak French.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s the superior language. The language of passion, of sensuality. Everything you say in Russian sounds like you’re telling off your dog when he doesn’t deserve it.”

“Russian is the language of men, while French is the language of women!”

“Yes,” Élie said with a smile. “They do rather like it.”

Andrei opened his mouth to retort but said nothing, turning his head.

“What?” Élie asked before noticing it for himself. The auras of the ghouls were growing weaker and then vanishing in a slowly spreading area. The vampires there were panicked and scattering, fleeing the area.

“What is that?” Élie asked.

“I don’t sense an aura,” Andrei said. “Some kind of magic effect.”

“I take it back,” Élie said. “These new magicians are trouble.”

The vampires exploded into action, making their way across the base in a blur of speed, soon finding the source of the problem. They came to a stop as they found a sea of ghouls, wreathed in fire. Lighting up the dark sky above them was a swarm of orange and blue glowing butterflies that dropped onto the ghouls from which even more were rapidly spreading.

“I think this is fine,” Andrei said. The aura of the butterflies was clearly of a lower rank than him. So long as there were no gold-rankers or a large group of capable silvers, he was not concerned.

“This doesn’t worry you at all?” Élie asked.

“We’ve done most of what we came here for. Killed the strong ones and made a big, wet mess. We don’t need the ghouls to trash all the magic weapons and it’s easier to organise leaving if all these ghouls are burned up,” Andrei said. “I hate those things.”

“The others are not going to like it,” Élie said.

“It’s not our fault. We didn’t set them on fire.”

“We should at least find out who did, though. I only sense one person behind the ghouls and she’s weaker than us.”

“There are two,” Andrei said. “The other one masks himself very well, despite also being weaker than us. I can barely sense him.”

“Trouble, then.”

“It’s that man.”

“What man?”

“The man with the magic butterflies, obviously. He’s the one from the events in Moravia.”

“Where?”

“Great Moravia.”

“Great Moravia hasn’t existed for a thousand years. The Hungarians conquered it. Are you saying this man’s a Hungarian?”

“No, he’s from that island. The one the English took and killed most of the black people.”

“That hardly narrows it down, Andrei. The damnable English.”

"You have a problem with colonisation?"

"I have a problem with the spread of English cooking technique."

"Perhaps we should focus on the present?" Andrei asked.

"Who was that man again?"

“He was the one who went into the big dome everyone was so obsessed with.”

“Didn’t several of people go into that? I heard one of them came back and turned into a giant octopus.”

"That doesn't matter. There's a man, he's here and clearly, we need to kill him."

Lower rank vampires came running out from amongst the ghouls only for bloody strips of cloth to whip out, grab them and drag them back, screaming.

“Yes, Andrei. I do rather see your point.”

## Chapter 435

### Forthright Honesty

The two ancient vampires watched their small army of ghouls burning and rotting at the same time. The ghouls were eerily quiet as they burned and died without making noise beyond the crackle and pop of flames burning their flesh. It was the screams of the lesser and lower-ranked vampires caught amongst the ghouls that punctuated the distant gunfire of soldiers and more ghouls fighting elsewhere on the massive base.

Vampires did not have the power to sense magic, but their sensitivity to life force was very strong. The gold-rank vampires could sense the life force of their weaker brethren, caught amongst the ghouls. That life force was being rapidly drained, vampire by vampire.

Above it all were the blue and orange butterflies, shining brightly in the night even with the glow of flames below them. Some of the butterflies flew in the direction of the two gold-rank vampires but Andrei held out a hand and blood droplets shot from his palm, exploding the butterflies before they came close.

“Keep an eye on them,” Élie said. “There are quite a lot.”

“Oh, thank you,” Andrei said. “I hadn’t noticed the giant swarm of glowing magic butterflies.”

“Something in there is draining life force,” Élie said. “Are you sure it’s a magician and not one of us?”

“Yes.”

“Should we go in and fight them?”

“Everything’s on fire,” Andrei said. “I’d rather wait for them to come out.”

“I don’t disagree,” Élie said, “but shouldn’t we go in and save the other vampires?”

The two vampires shared a glance.

“Life is challenge,” Andrei said.

“They’ll be all the stronger for overcoming it on their own.”

The ghouls were rapidly dropping, unmoving but still burning on the ground. After most of them had fallen, a cold voice rang out from within the ghoul pack.

*“As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest.”*

Andrei and Élie shared another glance.

“Is he talking to us?” Andrei asked.

They sensed what remnant life force remained in slain ghouls and vampires get sucked away all at once. They could even see it, moving through the air like red streamers. It gathering into a single point and was absorbed by a shadowy figure, standing

amongst the dead. Even with their exceptional vision, the vampires could barely make it out.

“Are you, perchance, experiencing an ominous premonition?” Élie asked.

“Now that you mention it,” Andrei said, “I do believe I am.”

“It suddenly occurs to me,” Élie said, “that if two people less powerful than us decide to engage us in battle, they’re either very foolish or know something that we do not.”

“That is very sound reasoning,” Andrei agreed.

They looked behind them, then back at the shadowy figure standing amongst the dead ghouls. Now that most of them had dropped, they could also see more people, to match auras they had already sensed. There was another magician, clad in stone armour and wreathed in flame. Her aura held the promise of consuming fire, the last thing a vampire wanted to encounter. Behind her was a mound of glowing lava, moving like a living thing.

A floating figure was surrounded by orbs that matched the colour of the butterflies. Its aura was alien, unlike anything the vampires had encountered before. The other looked human, aside from its red-purple skin, yet was anything but. There was hunger and blood in its aura that made even their own vampiric auras pale in comparison. They were also able to barely sense another aura, dark and hidden, seemingly many places at once.

The dark figure at the front was difficult to sense at all and, despite their superior power, the vampires could barely sense the domineering will it was currently holding in restraint. They turned and dashed in the other direction as quickly as their gold-rank speed would let them.

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Jason and Farrah stepped out of the sea of burning ghouls. Jason pushed back his hood and absently scratched his head as he sensed two vampiric auras shooting off into the distance. Colin and Gordon, along with Farrah’s magma elemental, were finishing off stragglers.

“They’ve scarpered,” Jason said. “They did a runner.”

“Saves us a fight,” Farrah said, dismissing her armour. “Works for me. My bracelet is nice and charged up now and I didn’t have to burn the charge fighting those two.”

“But why did they run?” he wondered.

Farrah looked back at the carpet of dead ghouls and vampires, plus the ceiling of magic butterflies.

“No idea,” she said. “Still, now we can go find your magic bomb. Should be easy enough to get it and go in the chaos.”



Jason nodded.

“There are still some ghouls and weaker vamps running around but the Network personnel should be able to handle it.”

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Travis Noble was twenty-one years old and a category two magitech weapons engineer from California. He was also having a very bad month. The day after he arrived in Germany, his supervisor went AWOL when the base's category four essence user ran off and took a handful of people with him, including Travis' boss. Noble was perfectly happy when the Germans put one of their own experienced and qualified people in charge of his department, only for his bosses to insist that an American be in charge instead.

That was how Travis wound up in charge of the Special Munition Stockpile Division, leading of a bunch of people that all hated him. The German's hated him because one of theirs was kicked out, while the other American's hated him for being queue-jumped by a guy on his first day. This didn't even make sense, as the regulations required the person in charge to be a magitechnician, while the other Americans were administrators and logistics supervisors. The lack of magitech experts was the reason Travis had been sent in the first place. This did not lead them to cut Travis any slack.

The people he got on best with were the soldiers and tactical specialists who were guarding the stockpile but whose chain of command was separate from Travis' departmental hierarchy. He now found himself huddled inside the main stockpile warehouse with the security detail, minus their silver-rankers who had left to meet up with the others on base and confront the vampires as a unit.

The stockpile warehouse was the most secure building on the base, with magical protection designed to hold up against all but the most powerful attackers. Unfortunately, those most powerful attackers had turned up. The department staff were hunkered down in the offices, while Travis himself was in the main warehouse with the security team and the weapon stockpile, in case his expertise was required. Even in their current situation, Travis couldn't help but be distracted by the head of the security team, Ingrid. The defeminising tactical outfit currently left her almost indistinguishable from the male soldiers but Travis had been working up the courage to ask her out for a week.

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“You know,” Farrah said as she drew a ritual diagram on the wall in chalk, “this is some impressive protective magic.”

“You can get in, though, right?”

Her head turned to give Jason a flat stare, her hand not pausing as she continued to draw without looking.

“Sorry,” Jason said, holding up his hands in surrender.

“You can get in, right?” Farrah muttered, turning her attention back to her work. “You don’t hear me questioning whether you can slowly and horrifically kill someone, making their final moments of life a terrifying ordeal of pain and despair. I just trust you to do what you do.”

“That’s a little hurtful,” Jason said. “I said I’m sorry.”

“Sorry enough to make a strudel?”

“If I can get the ingredients, sure. Food distribution is still a mess, although we do still have those nice apples from the astral space.”

Farrah spoke a short incantation and previously invisible runes lit up all over the building before fading again.

“That’ll shut it down for about an hour,” she said. “Wouldn’t want to permanently drop the protections, given all the stuff in here.”

“Good thinking,” Jason said.

They moved along the building to the main doors, which were large enough to drive a large truck through with clearance to spare. On top of being heavy, they were still locked, even with the magical protection gone. The lock broke as if it weren’t there as Farrah lightly pushed the sliding doors apart.

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When the walls lit up with magic runes that quickly faded, the security team’s tension went from high to razor-sharp. Guns were hefted at the ready and they positioned themselves to shoot from cover on command.

“What’s happening,” Ingrid whispered sharply to the magitechnician.

“Someone just dropped the magic defences,” Travis said. “Someone who knows their business, because they were turned off, not broken through.”

“Could they have been turned off from the inside?” Ingrid asked. “By one of your people?”

“The head of the German contingent is the only one other than me who could do that,” Travis said. “You know him, right? Think he’d betray us to the vamps?”

“No,” Ingrid said, “but today is not the day for assumptions. Bernd, Karl. Go bring Lukas here, and be careful. If he’s betrayed us, he may have tricks up his sleeve.”

Two of the security team made for the offices.

“Do you have a gun, techie?” Ingrid asked.

"Yeah," he said. "And it's Travis."

"Can you shoot it without hitting your own team?"

"Yes, Ma'am. No promises on hitting the other team, though."

"Just pull it out and do your best," she said. "No one is expecting much."

"I wish women would stop telling me that," Travis said. Ingrid gave him a sidelong glance, forcibly suppressing a snort of laughter.

Travis opened his dimensional space, which took the form of a holographic cabinet with a door that slid open. He reached in and pulled out what looked like an oversized, high-tech revolver where the spinning bullet chamber had been replaced with a belt-feed mechanism. A long belt of ammunition dangled from it, each bullet engraved with intricate glowing runes.

"Is that a belt-fed pistol?" Ingrid asked.

"I call it the Compensator," Travis said.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Ingrid said.

"What? No, not for that. I'm fine in that area. Perfectly fine."

"It's alright," she assured him.

"No, it's... look, I'm better at building guns than using them, so I made one where aiming was less of an issue. To compensate for my crappy marksmanship."

"Uh-huh."

"I don't have a small..."

Travis trailed off and everyone tensed up as they heard the main doors slide rapidly open. Voices started echoing through the large warehouse.

"So, we left the magical protections in place and broke the lock," a man's voice said.

"You think a lock is going to stop anyone looking to rob this place?" a female voice shot back.

"I guess it didn't stop us."

"It didn't stop who?"

"Okay, it didn't stop *you*. I'm breaking into the next place."

"That's an astral space; that doesn't take skill. You're just using your absurd magic power."

"I only got that magic power to go in that very same astral space and get you!"

"Oh, look at me. I'm Jason and my version of a sacrifice is getting amazing magical powers, oh no."

"You're going to talk to me about sacrifice? Do you know how many times I've died?"

“With how often you bring it up? Every time you go and get yourself killed you come back from the dead and somehow you’re complaining?”

“The first time wasn’t my fault! And the second time, I brought you back with me.”

“That was nice, actually, yeah. You know all the people in here are getting pretty nervous, right?”

“Yeah, hang on. Uh, excuse me, everyone. Please don’t shoot us; we’re just here to steal a nuclear weapon.”

“What are you doing?”

“I thought they might respond to forthright honesty.”

“Not about that. Now they’re definitely going to shoot us.”

“It’s not like it’s going to hurt.”

Ingrid stepped out of cover, levelling her rifle at Jason and Farrah. Farrah was no longer in her armour, while Jason still had his cloak and blood robes but the hood was pushed back to reveal his face. The weird energy in his eyes undercut what he hoped was a friendly expression.

Jason’s familiars had been returned to him, other than a few Shade bodies scouting out the base. Ingrid’s gaze fell on Farrah’s magma elemental in the warehouse doorway. It was a mound of lava the size of a bakery van with arms and what roughly looked like a face. She ignored it for the moment to stare at Jason.

“You’re Jason Asano,” she said. Jason turned unhappily to Farrah.

“Is there something about my face that makes me seem really, really forgetful? People keep telling me my own name as if I somehow don’t know what it is.”

“You do seem like an idiot,” Farrah said.

“Hey...”

“Remember the day we met? You kept getting knocked out by that guy with the shovel. It wasn’t a great first impression.”

“Okay, yes. Escaping took me a couple of goes, but I was new to a life of derring-do. And who was the one who beat the cult leaders? Oh, did I ever tell you what happened to that guy?”

“The one with the shovel?”

“Yeah. Turns out he joined the Builder cult and—”

“Excuse me,” Ingrid called out and Jason turned back to her.

“Oh, sorry,” Jason said. “If you could just point us to a conveniently-sized nuclear bomb, that’d be great. Preferably one with instructions. They don’t have to be in English.”

“You think I’m going to just hand over a nuclear weapon?” Ingrid asked.

“No,” Jason said. “Fortunately, you and your squad back there aren’t dangerous enough that I’ll need to hurt you badly when we take one.”

“What do you even want with a nuclear weapon?”

Jason glanced at Farrah.

“You’re the one who said forthright honesty,” Farrah told him.

“Alright,” Jason said. “I’m going to blow up some vampires. They have a stronghold that only I can get to. So I’m going to go there and nuke it into glass. The good thing is that the reason only I can get there is that it’s sealed in an isolated dimension. That means no blow-back on Earth.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Your belief is irrelevant,” Jason said. “We’re taking what we came for. We were hoping there would be a nice quiet vault to raid with no one here. You’d be well-served by pretending we were right.”

“So, that’s who you are?” Ingrid asked. “A man who comes in, using his power to take what he likes?”

Jason bowed his head.

“I never wanted to be,” he said softly, and then looked up, meeting Ingrid’s blue eyes with his alien gaze. “But yes, that’s who I am. So, shoot me or don’t. Either way, we’re walking out of here with what we came for.”

“Wait,” Travis said, coming out of cover, waving his arms. “Oh, this thing is heavy.” He set his gun down on a crate and moved up next to Ingrid.

“Techie, get back,” Ingrid hissed. “What are you doing?”

“Uh, hi,” he said, ignoring Ingrid’s order. “G’day, mate. That’s your thing, right? You’re super-Australian, even though you’re kind of Japanese.”

“Okay, a few things, mate,” Jason said. “One, Aussies hate it when seppos say g’day. It’s like nails on a chalkboard.”

“What’s a seppo?” Travis asked.

“You are, mate; don’t interrupt. Two, I’m not Japanese. I’ve been to Japan exactly twice and someone poisoned me in a resort hotel. Didn’t love it. Three, where did you get that gun? It looks super-sweet.”

“Jason...” Farrah said.

“Right, sorry. Look, mate, what are you doing running out like that? We’re having a very serious discussion, here.”

“If you’re looking to blow up some vampires,” Travis said, “I can help you. I’m your guy.”

“Travis!” Ingrid barked.

“Ingrid, do you know who this is? It's Jason Asano. He's the world's first superhero. He's been to another universe!”

“Travis, this is not for you to interfere with. You know the things they say about him.”

“That's all made up by people who want to diminish his influence,” Travis said.

“I wouldn't say all,” Farrah said.

“Whose side are you on?” Jason asked.

“Okay,” Farrah said. “How about we all take a step back, put away our guns and our...”

She looked around, seeing that she and Jason had already dismissed their conjured weapons. She looked back at the open doors of the warehouse.

“...giant lava monsters and talk about this calmly.”

Farrah looked from Jason to Travis.

“Preferably you and me,” she said to Ingrid, “while these two sit quietly and don't make trouble.”

“My job is to protect this facility,” Ingrid said.

“And that's what you're doing,” Farrah said. “You can't stop us with force, you have to know that. So your next option is negotiation. Buy yourself some time and mitigate as much damage as you can.”

“Why would you allow that?” Ingrid asked. “There are vampires out there, as well as our silver-rankers.”

“The vampires are dead or escaped,” Farrah said. “What's left of the base personnel are mopping up the scattered ghouls left behind. We didn't get here in time to save your silver-rankers, though, I'm sorry. They're gone.”

Ingrid paled but kept staring down the sight of her rifle at Farrah.

“How do I know that you weren't the ones who killed them?”

“Because we didn't kill you,” Farrah said.

Farrah waited a long moment until Ingrid dropped the barrel of her gun to aim at the floor.

“Okay,” Farrah said. “Let's talk.”

## Chapter 436

### Pertinent Factor

“There are offices in the back of the warehouse,” Ingrid said. “We can sit down and talk there.”

As acting head of security for the weapon stockpile facility, Ingrid directed her team to secure the warehouse now that Jason and Farrah were no longer the chief concern. Ingrid knew that there was nothing she could do to stop them, so trying was pointless. Negotiation was her only recourse.

“You don’t need to worry about the door we left open,” Farrah said. “My magma elemental will handle anything that comes that way.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t put all my faith in a giant pile of lava,” Ingrid said. “While I’m sure it’s very powerful, we don’t know the conditions around the base.”

“I can help you with that,” Jason said. “Shade, give... Ingrid, was it? Give Ingrid a status update on the base.”

Ingrid’s people stirred as Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow and started reeling off the disposition of the surviving base personnel, ghouls and vampires located in it. Ingrid organised two teams of her people to go out and assist.

"Tell you what," Jason said. "As a gesture of goodwill, I'll send my lads off to help your people out. They can run around with your teams."

Jason conjured up Colin from his own blood, looking like a blood clone of Jason. Gordon manifested from Jason’s aura, strange and alien. Two Shade bodies emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“My mates can help you out,” Jason said. “Shade can guide your people where they need to be, while Colin and Gordon can be the muscle.”

“I’m not sending my people out with your pet monsters,” Ingrid said.

“Farrah,” Jason said, “Are you getting an Anisa vibe off Ingrid, here?”

“A little bit, yes,” Farrah said. “Didn’t your friend Humphrey...?”

“He did, yeah. Let’s hope this works out better.”

Ingrid sent her team off and Jason sent his familiars out separately to operate alone.

“I have to say, I’m a little offended,” Jason said. “You Network people are on our side, you know. At least, you should be. Except when you periodically decide to come after me for whatever reason, obviously. Because let me tell you, I’ve had about as much of that as I’m willing to put up with. The next time you all—”

“Not the time, Jason,” Farrah chastised.

“Sorry.”

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In a farmhouse in Austria, abandoned since the monster surges, Gerling and his people had settled in to plan their next move. Gerling was being briefed by one of the people he had recruited from the Network. Jeff Campbell was underwhelming as a combatant, but an expert at intelligence gathering.

“Are you sure?” Gerling asked.

“This comes from people we planted in the Network branches years ago and are now pretty highly placed in the Global Defence Network,” Jeff said.

“We planted?” Gerling asked.

“Sorry, Boss; that the US Network put in place. The plants are still using the old communications protocols, or they were, at least. I’m pretty sure they know we’ve gone rogue, by now, so anything they feed us going forward is questionable. This was the last intel we grabbed before the news went widespread. There is a chance this is some kind of trap, but I’ve had enough independent verification that I’m confident it’s solid.”

“Do we have a timeline?” Gerling asked.

“No, Boss. You know better than most what it’s like trying to get Asano to do what you want. When they went to pitch this to him, they rounded up everyone they could that he wouldn’t punch on sight. Flew them all the way out from Australia.”

“And this permanent dimensional space in France. It’s a known factor?”

“Yes, boss. It has two apertures, both of which have powerful sealing magic put in place when the Lyon branch was keeping it a secret.”

“We’re going to want to catch Asano inside,” Gerling said. “You are looking into getting us past those seals, right?”

“Of course,” Jeff said. “I’ve been looking into high-level members of the Lyon branch from that time, but after they were found out, the International Committee spirited them away. My contacts in Europe aren’t as solid as the US, so I haven’t had any luck digging them out.”

“Then why are you smiling?” Gerling asked.

“Because the guy who was running the whole secret dimensional space project for Lyon was never caught. He got out early and defected to the EOA. He’s currently one of their leaders and we have a line on him in Los Angeles.”

“He’s protected, I take it,” Gerling said.

“Yes, boss. The best protection the EOA has to offer.”

Gerling grinned.



"Is that all?"

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Ingrid took Jason and Farrah to the offices in the back of the warehouse, where the rest of the department staff were still holed up. They went into a conference room where Jason and Farrah were on one side of the table while Ingrid and Travis sat on the other.

"Who are you, exactly?" Farrah asked Travis.

"Travis Noble. I know who you are, of course. You're Farrah Hurin and you were born in a whole other universe. I'd love to get your perspective on what—"

"Not the time, Travis," Ingrid said.

"Sorry," Travis said.

"This is the acting head of the Special Munition Stockpile Division," Ingrid said.

"Neither of you are the permanent occupants of your positions," Farrah observed.

"Did your bosses go off to fight the vampires?"

"My commander did," Ingrid said. "The previous department head for the SMSD went AWOL with Jack Gerling."

"Please tell me he didn't take a bunch of dangerous weapons with him," Jason said.

"That's an odd position, coming from someone looking to steal a nuclear bomb," Ingrid said. "Why not just ask the Network for it, if you're using it for legitimate reasons?"

"We don't work with the Network anymore," Jason said. "They asked us to do this and we agreed but we're doing it our way. The Network is neither trustworthy nor reliable."

"The Network has been protecting the Earth from magic for centuries," Ingrid said.

"Surely you can see we're needed now more than ever?"

"Which Network?" Jason asked. "The GDN? The True Network? The Chinese, the USA? Not exactly acting on a singular purpose, are you? Which one do you even belong to?"

"This is a joint facility that ignores factional disagreements. To act with that singular purpose you wanted."

"Jason," Farrah chided, "we did not come here to make this woman question her loyalties. You're taking us further from what we want, not closer to it."

"Ingrid, you won't get them on board with the unity line," Travis said. "The Network has kidnapped Mr Asano twice, along with killing his friend, his girlfriend and his brother. They only kidnapped Miss Hurin once, but they tortured her for several weeks. Sorry to bring it up."

Ingrid looked from Travis to Jason and Farrah.

"Did that truly happen?" she asked.

“Yes,” Farrah said and looked Travis over. He looked about nine years old with his boyish features and overeager expression. She was catching the same smell off him she got from Itsuki, the Japanese essence user fascinated with Jason.

“Want to guess how much of that was for the sake of protecting the world from magic?” Jason asked.

“Jason,” Farrah said forcefully. “I get it, but that’s not why we’re here.”

“You’re right,” Jason said, standing up. “I’m not going to be helpful, here. You sort it out while I go help my pet monsters clean up the leftovers.”

Shade rose from Jason’s shadow. Jason stepped into it and vanished, after which Shade sank into Farrah’s shadow.

“Jason understands very well what it is to be powerless,” Farrah told Ingrid and Travis. “Now that he has power for himself, he finds feeling powerless increasingly intolerable. It’s something of a right of passage for the strong. Given how weak everyone in this world is, he feels a constant temptation to just do and take what he wants. He knows that it’s wrong but until we leave for the other world and he’s surrounded by people truly more powerful than him, he’s going to keep sliding.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Ingrid asked.

“Because I need you to understand that we’re not negotiating over what we came here for. We’re taking it and you don’t get a say. We’re negotiating over how smoothly that goes and you have very little to offer.”

“It’s even less than you think,” Ingrid said. “We can’t access the most dangerous weapons. They’re in an underground vault with physical and magical protections that make this warehouse look like an open-air café. The only people who can access it are dead outside.”

Farrah looked to her shadow, as if waiting for something.

“What is it?” Ingrid asked.

“I was waiting to see if Jason would come back,” Farrah said, her voice cold. “He can sense every aura on this base and individually observe them across distances that normally you don’t see until category four. Your aura control is not bad but he knows that you just lied to me as well as I do. He’s also listening to us through his shadow. I don’t know if you’re stalling for time or trying to bluff me but now we’ve reached the point where negotiations have broken down. You are going to answer my questions and if you lie to me again, I’m putting you down. If you refuse to answer, I’m putting you down. If you try to stop me, not only am I putting you down but I’m putting your people down and none of you

are getting back up again. You have no further chances to push my forbearance, is that understood?"

Ingrid stared at Farrah before finally and reluctantly nodding.

"Alright," Farrah said. "I can break into this vault but having you open it up would be much easier. What does that require?"

Ingrid looked at Travis.

"As department head, he can do it," she said. "He requires two access keys, though, which we don't have."

"Who does?"

"The commander and deputy base commander each have one, carried around their necks."

"Silver-rakers?"

"Yes."

"Shade?" Farrah asked.

"Mr Asano is working on it as we speak, Miss Hurin."

"Thank you, Shade. Next question."

Farrah turned to Travis.

"You seemed very convinced that you could help us. Why is that?"

Ingrid gave Travis a sharp look and Farrah slapped a hand down on the wooden table between them. Under Farrah's palm, the wood started to blacken and smoke. Ingrid grimaced but said nothing.

"Travis?" Farrah asked.

"I was brought here as part of a project to rework our enhanced ordnance," Travis said. "I was never meant to be in charge. I was chosen because of my college research on creating specialised weaponry using quintessence."

"You studied magic in a school?"

"My family has been Network predating the War of Independence," Travis said. "The US has had magical teaching institutions for more than a hundred years. These days we mostly pass them off as fake colleges."

"Fake colleges?" Ingrid asked, despite herself.

"Yeah," Travis said. "Usually we pass them off as scams, like those institutions that give out shady doctorates to religious nuts so they can pass themselves off as scientists. Or the ones that are straight-up confidence schemes. There are so many and they hardly ever get cracked down on, so we pass ours off as just more of them. If the FBI or someone does take a look, they get gently nudged in another direction."

"That sounds incredibly corrupt," Ingrid said.

"You're surprised?" Jason's voice came from Farrah's shadow.

"Jason..." Farrah said.

Shade rose again and Jason emerged, this time with his hood up and his eerie eyes shining in its impenetrable darkness. He dropped two keys onto the table, both wet with blood.

"The gold-rank vampires got to them before we arrived," Jason said. "I'm sorry."

He vanished once again and Farrah turned to Travis.

"Tell me about your research," she said.

"Well," Travis said, "the basic premise is to not just make weapons that have enhanced power but to have the exact right properties to face specific enemies. In the last few decades, the entities appearing in dimensional spaces have grown stronger at a rate that exceeds the weapons we've developed to fight them. Many people are working on ways to make weapons stronger but the tiers of magic always present a bottleneck in advancement. My approach is to avoid that bottleneck through specialisation. Improving effectiveness without needing to increase the power."

"Through quintessence, you said?" Farrah asked.

"Exactly," Travis said. "Quintessence is perfect because it holds such specific energy. Take your standard magic energy pistol that fires off blasts of force and heat. They're efficient and effective against most things, but their power is limited. If we give up the force and heat for energy infused with sun quintessence, though, it loses out against most things but becomes much more powerful against vampires. I've already stocked an armoury here on base with anti-vampire weapons. Ingrid, could you take out your pistol?"

Ingrid pulled her pistol and placed it on the table. Her assault rifle was leaning against her thigh, her hand having not moved from it since they sat down.

"I made this gun," Travis said, tapping the pistol with a finger. "Fire quintessence like this one has is much easier to come by than sun, but it's still quite effective against vampires. Plus, it retains more general usability because fire works pretty well against most things."

"We were surprised at how well the normal soldiers were holding up against ghouls," Farrah said. "We need something a lot more powerful than a few enhanced guns, though."

"That's been my big project," Travis said. "It's why I knew I could help you. I've been working on a nuclear device where the modifications are much more comprehensive than just adding flavour to the damage output. I've been working on converting the power of a nuclear detonation into sunlight power, using a special matrix of category-three sun

quintessence. Category four would have been better, obviously, but they won't let me have any until I get a working prototype."

"If it doesn't work, why are we talking?" Farrah asked.

"It's not that it doesn't work," Travis said. "You're not from our world and I don't know if yours has an equivalent, but a nuclear device is unconscionably powerful. Too powerful to just go setting off anywhere. It's why I've been working on completely converting the output into energy that only affects vampires. The goal is to take it into the middle of a city, wipe out the vampires and leave the people and infrastructure untouched. It's not currently usable because while it will wreck vampires, it'll also turn wherever it is into a hole in the ground."

"Sounds like a winner," Jason's voice came from Farrah's shadow. "We'll take that, thank you."

"You still need our cooperation," Ingrid said. "You can take the device, but that doesn't mean you know how to use it."

"I'm willing to help," Travis said.

In a flash of movement, Ingrid had the pistol pointed at Travis's head.

"Ingrid?" Travis asked, his voice having gone up an octave.

"Now," Ingrid said, staring at Farrah. "Let's revisit that negotiating position."

"Oh, you shouldn't have done that," Farrah said, getting to her feet. "I can't help you now."

"Without him, you can't make the device work," Ingrid said.

"It doesn't matter," Farrah said. "You shouldn't have turned on your own guy. You're just one more Network lackey with no loyalty, now. Jason's not going to concede anything, whatever you or I say. To be honest, I'm fine with that."

"He doesn't have a choice. If he thinks he can teleport in here and take my gun before I pull the trigger, he's very much mistaken," Ingrid said. "I have the swift essence. I'm almost as fast as a category three."

"You're underestimating Jason's willingness to suffer the consequences of his principles," Farrah said. "Put your gun down or he'll kill you, whatever you do to Travis, here. I might even save him the time."

"Uh, I think there's a pertinent factor that both of you have already forgotten," Travis said.

"And what's that?" Farrah asked, her eyes not leaving Ingrid.

Travis snapped his fingers and Ingrid's pistol fell to pieces.

"I made that gun," he said.

## Chapter 437

### More of a Focus on Nipples

Travis skittered around to Farrah's side of the table.

"Ohmygodthatwasterrifying."

He warily glanced over at Ingrid.

"And weirdly kind of hot."

Ingrid and Farrah both turned flat looks on him.

"What?" he asked them.

"I get it," Jason said, appearing from the shadows and patting him on the back. "Not super appropriate, but I won't go throwing stones in that regard."

Jason turned his gaze on Ingrid. All she could see under his hood was the shifting blue, silver and gold of his eyes.

"So, this is where you kill me and all my people?" she asked.

"Yes," Farrah said.

"No," Jason said.

"But I promised," Farrah said.

"We're thieves and she's doing her duty as best she can. Who am I to begrudge someone a bold, desperate move?"

"Yours keep getting you killed. How are people going to learn consequences?"

"How does dying teach you consequences?"

"You're teaching the next person," Farrah said.

"If you kill them, how's the next person going to find out?"

"There's usually someone who gets away. I really thought you'd come down on the other side of this after she turned on one of her own people."

"She sucks, yeah, but you don't execute prisoners because they suck."

"I am never getting used to this world," Farrah said. "I want to go home."

"We will. Soon. You probably still shouldn't execute prisoners there either, though."

"What if she tries something again?" Farrah asked.

"At that point, she's just asking for it," Jason said.

Farrah turned an eager gaze on Ingrid.

"So," Jason said. "Where is that vault?"

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Knowing he had limited time before Asano made his way into the astral space, Gerling had 'borrowed' the fastest magically-enhanced plane the Chinese Network had in

Europe. The Chinese Network didn't share the joint operation bases in Germany with the other Network factions, having set up their own outpost in Austria. Just across the border from eastern Slovakia, it was another zone with higher than average magic.

Gerling used the plane for a whirlwind visit back to the US, grabbing Adrien Barbou and getting back out of the country within an hour. Speed, however, came at the cost of discretion.

"You should have come along quietly," Gerling said. "Dead superheroes don't look good on the news."

Barbou was handcuffed and suppression-collared in a seat of the plane. His clothes were dusty and torn, with bloodstains being all that remained of superficial wounds that had already healed. Gerling was sitting across from him, their seats facing one another over a table.

"The Building did have a door, you know," Barbou said.

"Not on the nineteenth floor," Gerling said. "I guess it doesn't have a nineteenth floor anymore, either."

"You're a mindless thug."

Gerling sneered.

"You kept a woman in a basement and tortured her for weeks and you want to criticise me about brutality?"

"Is that what this is about? The outworlders? You've run into Asano twice now, right? Are the other category fours making fun of you because you can't catch him?"

"Let me be clear, Barbou: you'll be doing two things during our time together. One, whatever the hell I tell you. Two, shutting the hell up. Note that neither of those things includes asking questions."

"They do if you tell me to ask questions," Barbou said. "You need to be more precise with your rules, Gerling."

Barbou didn't see the punch coming, Gerling's gold rank speed having him back in his seat before Barbou's senses registered impact.

"I hear Asano is mouthy too," Gerling said.

Barbou winced as he pushed his nose back into line with his cuffed hands, which were wetted by the free-flowing blood.

"You're going to help me access the permanent dimensional space in Saint-Étienne," Gerling said.

"You want to catch Asano while he's going after the vampires there?" Barbou asked with a wince. "You shouldn't be going after him, Gerling. Not yet."

“And why is that?” Gerling asked.

“He’s not lying about saving the world. I’ve learned only a little about what he’s doing and how. If he fails, we’re all done.”

“I do believe that he’s saving the world,” Gerling said. “He keeps getting distracted, though. Not only is he going to France to kill some vampires but he didn’t even head straight there. Right now, he’s in Germany. The vampires started the war by hitting up the Network strongholds in central Europe and Asano is there fighting them off.”

Gerling got up and left the cabin, coming back shortly with a beer.

“Picked up a taste for the German stuff while I was there,” he said, holding up the can. “Hard to get reliably, just now, but my assistant is a resourceful woman.”

He took an appreciative sip.

“Very nice. Now, Asano. He’s letting himself be distracted, time and again, which tells me that whatever he’s saving the world from, he’s not in a rush. And the fact that he’s always been vague at best about what he’s saving it from and why tells me that there’s a reason he doesn’t want us to know. This means that whatever he’s doing and however he’s doing it, it’s vulnerable somehow. The power can be taken from him and I’m going to take it. I’ll save the damn world myself.”

“It can’t be taken,” Barbou said. His bronze-rank recovery had repaired his nose, Gerling having held back to teach a lesson rather than do real harm. Healing did not clean the blood from Barbou’s nose, however, which had painted his mouth and chin red.

“What do you know about it?” Gerling asked.

“Not much,” Barbou said. “My boss never told me much, presumably because of a potential situation like this one.”

“Your boss Mr North?”

“Yes. He doesn’t share secrets but I’ve put some pieces together. Things he’s told me in passing or let slip in conversation. I think he’s lonely.”

“Lonely?”

“I’m quite sure he’s older and more powerful than anyone realises,” Barbou said, “and I’m certain he’s not human. I believe he’s older than the Network itself. He’s mentioned the Network founder few times and I think Mr North knew him well. Hated him, but loved him too, I think.”

“Would your boss want you telling me this?”

“I’ve ever been a vessel subject to the prevailing winds,” Barbou said. “Network, EOA. I’ll jump ship to the vampires if they win. Right now, the prevailing wind is you.”

“Then tell me more. Everything you know about Asano and his secrets.”



“I don’t know what it is that Asano is using to save the world,” Barbou said, “but originally it should have been possible to take it from him. Mr North always intended for Asano to have it, but it was always meant to be possible to take it away.”

“A contingency if Asano didn’t do what North wanted,” Gerling surmised.

“Exactly,” Barbou said. “I only learned any of this because North was flustered when he returned after Asano claimed the item. Told me things I don’t think he otherwise would. Asano somehow absorbed the item, permanently claiming its power for himself. That disturbed Mr North. I’ve never seen him shaken like that, before or since.”

“So, the item is gone?” Gerling asked.

“Yes,” Barbou said.

“Convenient,” Gerling said. “Your boss just happened to have a slip-up and reveal the exact right information to dissuade me from doing the exact thing you just told me I shouldn’t do?”

“The fact that I knew that is why I said it,” Barbou told him. “If you want to argue yourself in circles to do what you want, regardless of the truth, you don’t need me for that.”

“Very true,” Gerling said and punched Barbou again.

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“Madam?” Farrah asked as she shrugged on what looked like an oversized and overstuffed hiker’s pack. The pack was extremely rugged, due to the hundreds of kilograms it was holding up. It was designed such that only superhuman strength could carry it as a backpack.

“Medium Atomic Demolition Munition,” Travis explained. “M.A.D.M. We call it the madam. Well, I do. The base commander called it ‘stop fanning about and get back to work, Travis.’ Or he used to, I guess.”

“I don’t think he was talking about the bomb,” Farrah said.

“No, I’m pretty sure he was,” Travis said. “Those were his exact words when I asked him about it.”

“He literally said your name,” Farrah said.

“I did think that was odd,” Travis admitted.

Farrah ran both hands over her face.

“I know this feeling,” she complained.

“What feeling?” Travis asked.

“Never mind. Let’s just get out of here.”

“Okay,” Travis said as they walked out of the vault. Farrah moved carefully as while the pack might have been easy to lift with her strength, the weight distribution threatened

to topple her over. Jason was keeping an eye on Ingrid in the control room of the underground bunker that contained the vault.

“You can lock it up,” Travis called out and Ingrid pressed the button that set the ponderous door to slowly shut. She looked at the two access keys in the control console but didn't take them.

“Go ahead,” Jason said. “Give them to whoever ends up in charge of this place.”

Ingrid hesitated a moment before taking the keys and hanging their chains around her neck. She ignored the blood as she slipped them under her tactical vest. All four people went up the stairs from the underground bunker, back into the main warehouse. Ingrid's security team looked unhappy but none were foolish enough to make a move.

“I'm sorry it worked out this way,” Jason said to Ingrid. “Not enough that I won't do it, but still.”

“Individuals shouldn't have the kind of unfettered power that you have,” Ingrid told him.

“You're right,” Jason said. “But institutions inevitably focus more on perpetuating their influence instead of whatever their original ideologies may have been. People and rules. The answer is somewhere in the middle but it's always in flux and never quite right. People need rules or we turn into monsters, but if we choose rules over people, people get ground up in the machine. In the end, we do the best we can with what we have.”

“Do we,” Ingrid said.

“I hope we do,” Jason said. “I'll mess it up, you can trust that.”

He glanced at Farrah.

“Find people you trust to keep yourself in check, Ingrid. Otherwise, you'll find yourself pointing a gun at the nice boy who has a crush on you.”

“What?” Travis asked as he and Farrah stepped into the control room. “I mean, who? What? I have no idea what you're...”

He sighed.

“...oh dear.”

“You need to work on that aura control, Travis,” Jason said with a chuckle. “Your emotions are a little too on your sleeve.”

“Let's get out of here,” Farrah said to Travis. “Is there anything you need to take?”

“Wait,” Ingrid said. “Travis, you're going with them?”

“Ingrid,” Travis said. “After all this, the work I came here to do isn't going to resume anytime soon. I could sit around playing stockpile administrator while whoever ends up in charge sorts out the mess, but every single person in my department would be better at

that than me. Instead of counting crates, I'd rather use what I'm good at to make a difference."

"You just want to go off and play hero with your new celebrity friend," Ingrid accused.

"Yeah, probably," Travis admitted. "But look around, Ingrid. The world could use a few more heroes."

"Oh, nice," Jason said. "We could call you Gun Man, but he's a villain."

"From Tongan Ninja?" Travis asked.

"You've seen Tongan Ninja?" Jason asked.

"Only about twelve times."

"We should watch it on the plane," Jason said. "You need to grab anything on the way out?"

"My research notes. Oh, and my sandwich from the break room. It's hard to find good food, these days and I put a lot of effort into getting the ingredients."

"Oh, nice," Jason said as the pair headed off. "You know where a guy can get some flour around here? I'm going to make a strudel."

"That makes sense," Travis said as they walked away. "We are in Germany. Do you have apples?"

"Magic apples."

"Oh, wow. Wait, aren't magic apples usually evil?"

"These are the good ones," Jason said.

"That's exactly what you'd tell someone if you wanted them to eat an evil magic apple."

Farrah shook her head and followed after them.

"Great," she muttered. "There's two of them now."

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"The runway is probably damaged and there'll be ghouls everywhere, alive or dead," Travis said. "Taking off might be hard. Maybe your familiar should turn into a helicopter instead of a plane. He can do that, right?"

"He isn't a runway kind of guy," Jason said.

Darkness stormed out of Jason's shadow and took the form of a plane hovering in the air.

"Your familiar turns into a VTOL private plane?" Travis exclaimed. "It looks like a spaceship designed by a ninja. Are you Batman?"

"Batman doesn't have powers," Jason said.

“And Jason doesn’t have ice skate boots,” Farrah added. Jason and Travis turned to look at her.

“Since when do you know anything about Batman?” Jason asked her. “And why is that the first thing that comes to mind about him?”

“People kept talking about Batman,” she said. “I looked him up. There was more of a focus on nipples than I expected.”

## Chapter 438

### The Job That's in Front of You

After arriving in France, Jason created a modest boat from his cloud flask on an isolated stretch of the river Furan. The plan was to get some proper rest and make plans before heading downriver to Saint-Étienne. It also gave Travis time to modify the nuke, as well as instruct Jason and Farrah on its use.

The three were out on a covered deck. It was a cold winter day but that didn't worry the essence users. Jason and Farrah were in chairs while Travis sat on the floor in front of the semi-disassembled atomic device.

"The first thing I need to do is disable the function that stops it from being placed in dimensional spaces," Travis explained. "It's a safety feature to prevent people quietly pocketing a nuclear weapon but that's exactly what you'll need to do."

"I don't think that lugging it around on my back is a good plan," Jason said.

"I'm still not sold on you going alone," Farrah said.

"The key is going to be stealth, not power," Jason said.

"I can be stealthy," Farrah insisted.

"Yes," Jason said with a wry smile. "The volcano essence is famous for its discretion. If we get discovered after sneaking into the middle of a vampire nest, we aren't fighting our way back out. If I get found, I can get myself unfound."

"Fine," she conceded. "But you have to promise me something."

"What's that?" Jason asked.

"There's going to be people in there; regular people that they've rounded up to turn into ghouls or lesser vampires. Even just to feed on. Don't try and rescue them."

"Farrah..."

"No," Farrah said. "I know what you're like. You'll go in there, see people caged up or some such and get it into your head that you can somehow get them out before you set off the bomb. You can't. You have a problem with understanding your limits and that pushes you forward, but this isn't about you. It isn't even about the victims in that astral space. It's about all the damage the things in that place will do if they aren't stopped. It's about striking a heavy blow against the vampires, especially after the attacks in Germany. This is about arresting the momentum before they sweep over countless people."

"But if I see a way—"

“No,” Farrah said. “It's not a choice of saving them or not, Jason. It's a choice of a quick, clean death in white-hot fire or being turned into a monster. Or food. That's all you can do for them.”

Jason hung his head.

“Fine,” he mumbled.

“I need to hear you say it,” Farrah said, unyielding.

He looked up at her with angry eyes.

“I said fine.”

“Promise me, Jason.”

His face twisted in a snarl.

“I promise, alright? I'll go in there and kill a bunch of innocent people who, even as we speak, are probably hoping that people like us come along and save them.”

“Okay,” Travis said, getting to his feet. “I need to go in the other room. I left my thinly-veiled excuse to leave you two alone in there.”

They watched him go, the tense atmosphere at least a little diffused.

“You're not a superhero, Jason, whatever they might say on the television. That's just an image being sold. A story you tell yourself.”

“Like adventurer? It doesn't matter what we call ourselves, Farrah. It's what we do that matters.”

“No, Jason. All that matters are the consequences of what we do. It doesn't matter if you try and save those people. It only matters if they get saved and they won't. Even if you somehow extracted them from the astral space, this is vampire territory, now. You think that the astral space apertures are just sitting out in the open with no vampires guarding them? You and I might be able to handle it, but what about the people you have somehow managed to sneak away from the army of enemies? You just told me that I couldn't go in because I wasn't stealthy enough.”

“I know all this, Farrah.”

“Of course you do; you're not an idiot. You have this bad habit of acting like one, though. That's fine when the only person you're putting on the line is yourself, but those days are behind you. Rufus told you from the very beginning that if you choose this life, you'll end up responsible for others. You can ignore that, and plenty do, but is that the person you want to be?”

“No,” Jason said.

“Of course it's not,” Farrah said, her voice softening and her shoulders losing their tension. “Look, Jason, I know that you want to be the guy who saves the day with some

crazy plan. It's nice when you can do that. You saved my life because you walked back into a sacrifice chamber full of cultists when any sane person would have run like the wind. That's amazing, but sometimes there is no crazy plan. You have to do the job that's in front of you, even when doing the job is awful."

"You sound like Rufus," Jason said.

"Sometimes I have to," Farrah said with a smile. "Look, I never liked the Network's plan to have us strike-force our way through this astral space. I don't think they ever really bought the whole saving the world thing. Their idea feels like a long shot they were happy to take because they know we're done with them and don't care if we die trying. If we do, they can just try the bloody invasion approach and spend the bodies it takes to get it done instead. But now we've got Travis and his bomb. Sneak in, sneak out is a plan that actually sounds workable."

"He's a good kid."

"Of course you like him," Farrah said. "He's basically you from when we first met. It's a good thing he's eavesdropping because he could stand to learn the lessons you have trouble taking in."

They heard the sound of someone tripping over in the cabin next to them.

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Jason went over the arming sequence with Travis until he was confident he would get it right, even if he found himself doing so under extreme conditions. Without more information about what awaited him in the astral space, he had to assume things would go wrong.

"I've stripped out everything I put in to limit the physical blast," Travis explained. "The force quintessence you gave me should enhance the blast instead, although it was a bit of a rush job. Without extensive testing, I can't be sure how effective it will be. I can guarantee you a great big blast, infused with a boatload of sun magic. It's only a question of how big. The best estimate I can give you is very."

Farrah handed Jason some sheets of paper.

"Study this," she said. "If you perform this ritual before placing the bomb, there's less chance of it being discovered in the time between you setting it and getting out."

"If I'd only kept my damn tongue in front of the Builder's lackey, I could have set it off on the spot and made sure," Jason said. "There are worse ways to spend a life."

"If you'd held your tongue, you wouldn't have been you," Farrah said. "And if you weren't you, I'd have died in the desert and some blood cultist would be running around with your apocalypse monster."

“His what?” Travis asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jason said.

“She just said apocalypse monster. I worry if someone puts mayonnaise on my sandwich and you want me to ignore an apocalypse monster.”

“Stop talking about him like that,” Jason said. “You’ll hurt his feelings.”

“It’s an apocalypse monster,” Travis said. “Do its feelings matter?”

“It’s an apocalypse monster,” Jason said. “I’d say they really, really do.”

“It’s time to go,” Farrah said.

“I think this warrants more discussion,” Travis said.

Jason shook his head.

“Just tell him the story while I’m gone,” he said. “Maybe show him some recording crystals.”

“While you just casually head off for a stroll, yeah,” Farrah said. “Just remember that the priority is coming back alive.”

“Don’t worry,” Jason said. “I’m definitely not the kind of guy who goes off and gets himself killed all the time.”

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The astral space had two apertures. One was in Saint-Étienne, while the other was more isolated. Jason chose the Saint-Étienne aperture because it would likely be more guarded. He could gather intel that might help him and if he couldn’t slip through undetected, the other aperture was still there to try.

Saint-Étienne was almost unrecognisable from Jason’s previous visit. It had been a major centre of Network activity from the moment it was discovered that the Lyon branch had been hiding the astral space, just weeks after Jason’s return to Earth. The Network’s International Committee had purged the Lyon branch and seized control, turning the astral space into a spirit coin farm.

The vampiric takeover in France had been one of the most hard-fought in Europe, pitting some of the Network’s most powerful people and resources against many of the strongest ancient vampires to arise. The gold-rank vampires were relatively small in number, but without gold-ranked essence users to confront them, the Network had been pushed out in a series of destructive clashes.

The Saint-Étienne astral space was a critical strategic asset, so the city had suffered more than most in the struggle to control it. Jason found it looking more like Beirut in the eighties than the French metropolis it has been. The resemblance to a war zone didn’t



stop with the destroyed buildings, either. The city was thick with an occupying force, vampires of all ranks keeping both normal humans and ghouls both penned up cages.

For the humans, their cages were more like chain-link pens that would be easy enough to escape for anyone willing to brave the razor wire at the top. The patrolling vampires were the true disincentive to escape. The ghouls were in actual reinforced cages with thick metal bars.

The magic around the astral space was very low, barely increased despite the general increase in magic levels worldwide. This meant that even low-rank vampires were largely unimpeded by the sun. Combined with the presence of the astral space, it became obvious why the vampires had fought so hard to claim the area.

Jason had no problems moving through the shadows of the ruined city, scoping out the terrible conditions. The humans in their huge pens were left largely exposed to the elements, with only a scattering of blankets. He sensed dead among them that the vampires hadn't bothered to remove; the old and young too weak to resist the winter.

Examining the ghoul cages from relatively close, Jason realised that while they looking strong, they should not have been enough to hold the ghouls. The bars were magically enhanced, with faint runes carved into the metal.

This started to answer the open question of how vampires, with their lack of ritual magic, managed to use the sealed astral space apertures. The Lyon branch had established permanent seals that could be open or closed but would take a very long time to break into with ritual magic.

The Cabal, including the vampires, had little to no ritual magic expertise. The materials were generally sourced in proto-spaces, over which the Network had held a monopoly. Jason had heard of some vampires wielding blood magic but material reinforcement rituals, while ordinary to the Network, were beyond the Cabal.

It seemed likely that the vampires had seduced away or suborned some of the Networks ritualists during their conquest of Europe. Jason had not extended his senses to search for essence users because vampires had sensitive aura senses and could possibly detect him.

Exploring the occupied section of the city for more information, he discovered that it was serving as some kind of transport hub. Along with people being trucked in and ghouls being trucked out, there were also crates with some kind of equipment. Discreetly opening one for a look, it had the appearance of medical equipment. It was imbued with magic, however, and Jason suspected it was part of the program to make ghouls on a wider scale than vampires could on their own.

While searching around, Jason spotted some of the ritualists he had postulated about. They appeared to be enslaved, iron-rankers with foot manacles being forced to perform magical tasks like checking and maintaining the ghouls cages.

Leaving them be, with Farrah's admonitions echoing in his head, Jason turned his attention to the astral space aperture. He couldn't enter a true astral space from anywhere, the way he could with a proto-space, but he could ignore the seal on the aperture. He had magically examined the seal in the past and knew that with his skill level at the time, it would take weeks to crack the seal open with ritual magic.

The essence users he'd seen around didn't seem up to the task, having observed them at work. He guessed there were more capable ones inside the astral space, probably ones who had been part of the team managing the astral space before the vampires took over.

The aperture was contained in the only newly-constructed building he had seen, which appeared to be a brick warehouse. From the crude and functional aesthetic, its construction had prioritised speed and sturdiness. The magical alarms in place were clearly slapped together, to the point that Jason could bypass them just by manipulating his aura a little.

From listening in on the vampires, Jason discovered that the aperture was only periodically unsealed, at which point there would be a flood of activity in and out. During those periods, the aperture was heavily guarded and could be resealed at a moment's notice, should anything like a Network attack take place. Outside of those times, the guard was reduced but not entirely removed.

It was not hard to infiltrate the building and Jason slipped through the aperture without so much as a ripple of aura.

## Chapter 439

### Going Suspiciously Well

The astral space was a fog-filled realm of dilapidated manors and ruined castles, rising from a sea of mist. They were connected by crumbling stone bridges that spanned between them and Jason's instincts told him that descending into the mist would be a Very Bad Idea. With poor visibility and murky light, it looked like a place that should have had vampires all along.

Jason's previous visit was one of his most violent episodes, slaughtering Network personnel and EOA superhumans alike in his bloody determination to rescue Farrah. The environment was perfect for a shadowy stalker of Jason's ilk, which had not changed. This time he didn't slaughter his way through but moved unnoticed; another unremarkable shadow in the mist.

As he and Farrah had surmised, Jason found pens for humans, like those outside. For good or ill, these were mostly empty, while the ghoul cages here were filled to capacity. He estimated they would likely open up the astral space to ship out more people, soon. Jason unhappily but resolutely left them be, seeking out the place where the conversion process took place.

The primary goal of Jason's mission was to eliminate the infrastructure that allowed the ghoul creation process to be franchised out. The secondary target was the operation already pumping out undead monstrosities, along with the man behind it all.

The people of Makassar were victims twice over; once when they were killed and again when turned into the unquiet dead. They still haunted Jason's dreams and he would very much like to send the man who desecrated them to meet Shade's father. His preference would be for a long, personal encounter but he would accept nuking the man into atoms. Any ghouls and vampires that died in the process were gravy.

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Gerling and his small team of silver-rankers chose differently from Jason when it came to invading the astral space. They chose the more isolated aperture and they chose assault over stealth. After eliminating the vampires guarding the entrance, they put Barbou to work cracking open the seal.

"I can't even be certain that I will still be able to access it," Barbou warned as he finished drawing the ritual circle. "Unless they haven't reconfigured the seal at all since..."

The moment he completed the seal, the invisible aperture shimmered into being.

"I guess they haven't," Barbou said. "That's just unprofessional."

\*\*\*

The Chinese gold-ranker, Chen, was travelling along a French road in the back of a van. His fellow occupant was very unusual, but someone Jason would have recognised.

"You have executed the design adequately," Shako said, looking at the device in the van with them, strapped in place.

"And if I do this, you will deliver me the power that Asano is using to save the world?" Chen said.

"Yes," Shako said. "While Asano is still able to act, I am unable to intervene. He stole the device to repair this world from its creator and antagonists prevent him from making another. Only if Asano dies and the device is lost will he be permitted to create another, for this world will still need to be saved."

"Asano is elusive and resourceful," Chen said. "The place he has created for himself is a stronghold for him. This is a rare chance to catch him exposed, but could we not just send gold rankers into the astral space?"

"Asano is slippery," Shako said. "Even death has failed to stop him. He must be annihilated by forces that make sure his soul leaves for the realm of the dead, never to return."

"Couldn't you go in yourself to make sure?"

"I am restricted twice over," Shako said. "This avatar you see before you is merely a weak projection. The entry of my true self would damage your already fragile world. I am also bound by the same restrictions that protect Asano. I can teach and guide, as I have in helping you construct this device, but I cannot act."

"I'm worried that this will be dangerous if our world truly is as fragile as you say," Chen said. "A dimensional bomb, fuelled by a reality core."

"It is not a bomb, as you understand it," Shako said. "It will break down the astral space, annihilating everyone and everything inside. Asano will be gone, Gerling will be gone and you will have struck a great blow against the vampire threat. Your nation will be on the path from leading the world to dominating it. Then you will save it, not just solidifying this outcome but positioning you as the most prominent member of the most dominant force on this planet."

"I don't do this for my own glory," Chen said.

"Of course not," Shako said.

\*\*\*

“Loud explosions are for the outside,” Gerling said. The vampires just inside the aperture had been eliminated with speed but Gerling held off on using his abilities. His explosive powers would be like sending up a signal flare.

“We move fast and take down who we must as quick and quiet as possible,” Gerling said. “The objective is to find Asano.”

Gerling had recruited someone very specific for the purposes of chasing down Jason. A silver-ranker with the light and trap essences, he was an expert in purging shadows.

“You realise this plan is idiotic,” Barbou said. “You think you can just randomly find him by checking shadows? You don’t even know if he’s here yet, or been and gone.”

“We’re doing more than checking shadows,” Gerling said. “We’re going to lace the shadows around this aperture with light traps that will reveal his location to us.”

“And if he uses the other aperture?” Barbou asked.

“My second team is attacking it from the outside,” Gerling said. “They’ll use a device that destabilises apertures, making it unusable for hours.”

“You have a second team? Are you sure they can handle the forces at the other aperture?”

“They’re silver-rank elites from the US,” Gerling said. “They scouted it out and signalled me the good-to-go before we came in.

“And if Asano doesn’t show up in your window?”

“He’s already inside. You see, all those people studying the magic town Asano made haven’t been idle. They might not have deciphered much, but they did find a way to tell whether Asano was in direct contact with the town. Something about magical resonance; I don’t pretend to understand. What it means, though, is that they can detect when Asano goes out of range, and they’re confident that Asano’s range covers the planet.”

“So, if he’s out of range,” Barbou realised, “he’s entered a dimensional space.”

“Now you’re getting it,” Gerling said.

“Surprisingly well-prepared, for a semi-shaved ape.”

Gerling punched Barbou in the face again.

\*\*\*

When Gerling had assaulted the area external to the astral space aperture, he had used his powers to full effect. With the aperture sealed, no communication was possible so he had been free to go all out. It had originally been a nondescript spot by an empty road, outside the city. After it was revealed to the International Committee, a secondary outpost was built, which had been taken over by the vampires. The outpost was now in ruins, and

what was left was painted red by the combination of Gerling's explosive powers and the vampires that previously occupied it.

Chen's van arrived after the fact. The normal van was not as fast as a gold ranker but was far less suspicious should a gold-rank vampire be around with their powerful senses. There were plenty of delivery vehicles on the road since the humans the vampires held prisoner needed to eat or die.

"He hasn't changed," Chen said, looking around the ruined outpost. "Such a barbarian."

The van had contained only Chen, Shako and a silver-rank driver, who was carrying the drum containing the dimension collapsing device.

"My information is that the seal is sophisticated and difficult to open," Chen said as he and Shako looked at the spot in which the invisible aperture resided. Shako snorted disdain and held out a hand. Stone lines in the shape of a ritual circle rose from the concrete floor and the aperture bloomed into being.

"Didn't even need an incantation," Shako said derisively. "What passes for magic here is an embarrassment."

Chen went through the aperture to make sure nothing was waiting for them on the other side, found the vampires there dead and came back.

"Do we need to take it deep into the dimensional space?" Chen asked.

"No," Shako said. "You can set it off right on the other side."

"You heard him," Chen told the driver. "Set the timer for ten seconds and get out."

\*\*\*

"This is going surprisingly smoothly," Jason whispered. There was no one close by but he was not going to tempt fate and the hearing of gold-rank vampires.

"This appears to be the least trafficked room within this central area," Shade said.

"The bomb is unlikely to be discovered in the time it takes to exit the astral space."

They were in an old wine cellar, the racks mostly rotted and the only bottles remaining in shards on the floor. What had once been a manor above had been completely wiped away and replaced with the most disgusting place Jason had encountered since the kitchen of a cannibal cult. Somewhere between an abattoir and a manufacturing plant, it combined grisly exsanguination with industrial production.

Jason completed the ritual to hide the bomb's presence then activated it according to Travis' instructions. He had gone over it again and again until he remembered the relatively simple process perfectly but he checked it against his notes anyway. Once he was certain, he set the timer and left.

Slinking through the dark, he restrained his aura as much as he could, knowing there were gold-rank vampires about. Restraining his aura diminished his supernatural senses that relied on it, but he only needed to sense far enough to avoid danger. As he made his way from the most populated, and therefore dangerous, area, things were going suspiciously well. Just as he had that thought, he sensed a powerful wave of dimensional energy move across the astral space like a tsunami.

“Oh, come on,” he complained. “I didn’t even say it out loud.”

- 
- A dimensional event has triggered the collapse of the astral space you are in.
  - Your ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has a stabilising effect on the immediate space around you and will maintain a section of physical reality around you that will not collapse.
  - The presence of physical space that cannot be collapsed has anchored the collapsing astral space. Due to conditions in the physical reality to which the astral space is connected, a transformation event has been triggered.
  - A transformation zone has been triggered. Due to being coterminous to an area of disintegrating dimensional space, the transformation zone will demonstrate abnormal properties.

---

“Are you kidding me? Again?”

Jason looked around as the ubiquitous fog started to take on a rainbow hue. He was standing atop a stone spire rising from the fog and covered by a castle, most of which had collapsed away. The fog started to coalesce, almost into a liquid, and started rolling away from him to reveal more of the collapsed castle.

The castle itself started to change, dissolving into mist as well, but this did not share the rainbow colour of the space around him. It even retained the shape of the castle from which it had dissolved and then expanded to replace the missing sections.

- 
- The transformation zone has formed an abnormal genesis space. Your ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised a section of that space.
  - Your ability [Spirit Domain] is asserting authority over the stabilised space and forming a spirit domain. Abnormal effects will not occur within your spirit domain but anomalous effects will attack your spirit domain in an attempt to homogenise it with the remainder of the transformation zone.
-

Jason watched as a castle made of clouds was made from the ruins of what came before. The rainbow energy forming from the fog became a bubble surrounding the castle.

---

- You have established a permanent spirit domain. The maximum total area your spirit domains can cover is limited by your soul strength and your rank. Current amount of maximum spirit domain established: 3287%. Increase your rank to increase your maximum total spirit domain size.
  - Once genesis space had formed territories, abnormalities will begin to attack your spirit domain. You may expand your spirit domain by expanding it into other territories within genesis space.
- 

Jason ran a hand over his face.

“Farrah is going to be so mad I didn’t bring her. Wait, what about the nuke?”

\*\*\*

Outside the astral space, Shako looked at the dissolving aperture, his face filled with rage.

“No! What is this? WHAT DID YOU DO?”

“We have to go!” Chen yelled.

The mass of dimensional energy was plain for both of them to sense, like the outer edges of a tropical storm. Shako ignored him and Chen shot away, as fast as his gold-rank speed would take him. Only when he was well clear of the dimensional forces did Chen stop and turn around. Initially invisible, those forces had taken on a rainbow hue before being sealed away inside the dome of a transformation zone as it shimmered into being. Chen trembled as he looked at it.

“What did I do?”



## Chapter 440

### One of Asano's Secrets

By the time Jason expanded his spirit domain into a fourth territory, the enemies were growing truly dangerous. Although extremely weak for their rank, they were still gold-rank entities and with each territory Jason claimed, the attacking anomalies grew stronger. In the previous transformation zone, Jason had sent off the gold-rankers before the transformation zone reacted by making the anomalies that rank as well. Jason assumed that since the anomalies here were gold rank, the transformation zone was reacting to the most powerful of the vampires caught up in it.

If it weren't for the fact that Jason retained all his essence abilities this time, he would have struggled to handle even the first territory. Possessing the spirit domain power from the inception of the transformation zone shielded Jason's territory from the negative effects of the transformation zone at large.

The fourth territory was similar to the astral space it had been formed from, being filled with eerie, obscuring mist. It lacked the chasms spanned by crumbling bridges, but there were still crumbling gothic buildings. Most of it was made up of woodland, though, the mist drifting between trees with ethereal silver leaves. Every so often, Jason would find one with a pale white peach dangling from a branch, which he plucked and stowed away.

---

Item: [Ghost Fruit] (gold rank, common)

*Fruit that contains an otherworldly power (consumable, food).*

- **Effect:** For a moderate period after consumption, any magical damage inflicted by essence abilities or other innate powers adds disruptive-force damage in addition to the normal damage.

---

It would have been useful for confronting the ghost-like anomalies that appeared to attack Jason but consuming gold-rank food would do him more harm than good. Fortunately, his powers were able to treat the incorporeal entities as if they were flesh and blood using the afflictions he had picked up at silver rank.

- 
- **[Mortality] (affliction, magic):** Negates immunity to curses. This includes intrinsic immunities such as from not having a soul or not being alive. Cannot be cleansed while any curse affliction is in effect.
  - **[Blood From a Stone] (affliction, magic):** Negates immunity to blood and poison effects. This includes intrinsic immunities, such as from not having a biology or

corporeal form. Entities without blood can bleed while under this effect. Cannot be cleansed while any blood or poison affliction is in effect.

- [Weakness of the Flesh] (affliction, magic): Negates immunities to disease and necrotic damage. This includes intrinsic immunities, such as from not having a biology or corporeal form. Cannot be cleansed while any disease affliction is in effect.

---

The afflictions led to the odd sight of ghosts dying like living creatures, leaving behind ectoplasm laced with blood and rot. With the sheer number of them, it left the misty forest dripping in foul goo.

When the final ghost fell, Jason waited for the zone boss to appear, fingers crossed. “Please be the marshmallow man. Please be the marshmallow man.”

When he sensed another almost featureless ghost appear, only much larger, Jason was disappointed. He held his hands out to his sides and cast a spell.

*“As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest.”*

By making them vulnerable to blood effects, Jason could drain the energy from the ghost-like anomalies as if it were life force, drawing it in and absorbing it in a huge wave.

- 
- You have gained instances of [Blood Frenzy] through the ability [Blood Harvest].
  - You have reached the maximum number of instances of [Blood Frenzy]. Further instances will be converted to instances of [Blood of the Immortal].
  - You have gained instances of [Blood of the Immortal] through the ability [Blood Harvest].

---

This was the secret to Jason fighting the gold-rank anomalies as they grew stronger. Blood frenzy was a buff that increased his speed and recovery, allowing him to at least partially keep up with a gold-ranker’s speed, even if he couldn’t quite match it. The heightened recovery attribute boosted the effectiveness of his many self-healing powers, including the potent healing of blood of the immortal. Triggered when Jason suffered damage, it was a potent but short-lived healing effect that would sustain Jason in the face of powerful attacks.

Jason looked at his familiars.

“Alright, gents. Back to work.”

\*\*\*

“Normally essence users caught in a transformation are rendered unconscious throughout the process but aren’t changed,” Barbou said. “The fact that we’re awake tells us that this is an abnormal transformation zone, similar to the one in Slovakia.”

He looked at Gerling.

“You’re the only one with any experience inside a zone like this.”

“Our abilities were sealed away in the last zone as well,” Gerling said. Given the circumstances, he wasn’t going to keep giving Barbou a hard time. The Frenchman might only be bronze-rank but he was a better ritualist than anyone Gerling had managed to recruit.

“What about ritual magic?” Barbou asked.

“We never tested it in the other transformation zone.”

“That should probably be our first step, then,” Barbou said. “I’ll try a loot ritual on one of these things that attacked us.”

“Asano called them anomalies,” Gerling said.

“He has a power that gives him information on the things he encounters, so he’d know,” Barbou said.

They were in a strange village that looked like a tourist attraction because it was scaled for knee-high people. The anomalies that attacked them were tiny villagers with farm implements, although there had been a carpet of them they had to eliminate. Without powers, they had been forced to physically crush them, which was surprisingly difficult.

While the power level of the anomalies was only around that of a low-end silver-rank monster, their true rank was gold and they proved rather resilient. Many of Gerling’s silver-rank minions had been injured, as well as rather disturbed after killing all the tiny people with their bare hands. Barbou had carefully avoided the fight, atop one of the diminutive buildings.

“What are these things?” one of Gerling’s men asked, holding up an orb swirling with black and red energy.

“PUT THAT DOWN,” Gerling roared. “You want to be a goddamn tentacle monster?”

“That’s where that thing came from?” Barbou said. “Interesting. Did you learn anything from Asano about them?”

“I think he had some way of using them to claim territory,” Gerling said.

“Which is presumably how he created his magic town,” Barbou surmised.

“I don’t think he used them in their current state, though,” Gerling said. “I think he changed them, somehow, but he never told us how.”

“In fairness,” Barbou said, “I wouldn’t have told you either.”

\*\*\*

Jason returned to the cloud castle at the centre of his new spirit domain before he expanded into the next territory. Under Jason’s control, the castle had morphed from its

original design in the classic Western-European style to more of a palace. It was now made up of wings centred on the same pagoda to be found at the heart of Jason's first domain.

Rather than head for the pagoda, Jason went to check on the people housed in one of the palace wings. Jason had found more people turned into celestines, much like the farming family from his first domain. This time there were many more, the people who had been caged up in pens. Thus far, he had not encountered any of the ghouls that had been near them at the time.

Jason would have liked to bring out his grandmother to take them in hand but his spirit vault wouldn't open in the transformation space. Being a part of his spirit domain ability, it was tied up in reshaping the space around him. Jason could take items for his inventory, though, so he provided what food he could and left them to their own devices.

After checking on them and fending off most of their questions, he made his way to the pagoda. He rode the elevating platform to the top floor and surveyed his new domain from the balcony. Immediately around the palace were deep pools of water, spanned by narrow strips of land. When claiming that territory, anomalies had crawled up out of the water to attack.

The subsequent territories were quite disparate, from the fog forest to a city reminiscent of Prague, but not the real Prague. It was more like Prague from espionage movies, all shadowy corners and cobbled streets glistening from rain that always seemed to have just happened.

Jason took out one of the items he had taken from the ghost boss.

---

Item: [Dark Orb] (unranked, uncommon)

*Contains the power to unseal the power of darkness. (consumable, awakening stone).*

- Requirements: Sealed [Dark Essence] ability.
- Effect: Unseals a random [Dark Essence] ability.
- You have 0 sealed dark essence abilities.

---

Like all bosses, its loot included an orb to unseal one of Jason's abilities, but this time he didn't need them. It was useless for its intended purpose but Jason took out another item; a doom orb left over from the last transformation zone. Jason completion of the transformation zone had changed it, however.

---

Item: [Eye of Doom (dormant)] (unranked, legendary)

*Contains the potential to bestow spirit domains with the power of doom. Requires more energy before it can be used (consumable, awakening stone).*

- Requirements: Spirit domain, [Doom] essence.
- Effect: Adds an additional passive effect to the wielder's spirit domains.
- Current power: 36%
- Consume essence orbs in order to increase power.

---

The eye of doom looked just like one of Gordon's eye orbs. Jason touched the two orbs together and the dark orb melted into the eye.

- 
- Eye of Doom has accumulated power.
  - Effect: Adds an additional passive effect to the wielder's spirit domains.
  - Current power: 48%
  - Consume additional essence orbs in order to further increase power.

---

Jason put the orb away and leaned on the railing, his mind troubled. He was unsure if the Earth's dimensional boundary could handle another shake-up, meaning that Jason would need to completely stabilise the transformation zone to prevent it from punching a hole in the universe. Even with his full powers, he was uncertain about his chances.

With the anomalies growing closer to the strength of an ordinary gold-rank monster with each new territory, Jason was uncertain if he could claim it all. He had grave concerns about what awaited him in the final territories, which he had not risked claiming in the last transformation space.

Jason had two points of consolation that gave him hope for success. One was that his spirit domain already had its defences in place, helping fight against the anomalies in great number. It was growing harder with each expansion, though, as the anomalies became more resilient to the silver-rank effects. The second consolation was the most powerful weapon at Jason's disposal.

At first, Jason thought premature detonation of the nuke had triggered the transformation space, but while exploring the territories he found it again. Not only had the detonation sequence been cancelled but, like most things in the transformation zone, it

had been changed. Jason took it out from his inventory to examine it again. No longer a backpack nuke, it now took the form of an unwieldy rocket launcher.

---

Item: [Travis' Big Rocket] (silver rank, rare)

*Definitely not compensating for anything (consumable, bazooka).*

- **Effect:** Launches a rocket containing vast and destructive powers of solar and kinetic energy.

---

It was silver rank, as the original device had been, allowing Jason to make use of it. He just hoped that when the time came, it would be enough.

\*\*\*

Gerling was looking at two orbs, sitting on the ground in front of him. They were identical in size but differed in the colour of the energies swirling within. One was black and red, the unstable cores Gerling was familiar with. The other was filled with blue, silver and gold light.

“So this is how he did it,” Gerling said.

“We can’t be certain,” Barbou said.

“No, this is it,” Gerling said with certainty.

Barbou’s loot ritual had produced the refined version of the orb.

“This is what Asano used to claim the transformation zone for himself,” Gerling said. “He has a loot power, so it was easy for him, but now it’s my turn. I’ve finally dug out one of Asano’s secrets.”

“Even assuming you’re right,” Barbou said, “which is quite an assumption, by the way. There is limited power in this orb. You’re going to need a lot of them if you want to start affected all this space around us.”

“So, you’ll loot more,” Gerling told him.

“I’ll need more spirit coins for that many looting rituals,” Barbou said.

Gerling grinned.

“We still have our racial powers,” he said. “And as it happens, Bennett, here, has a storage power as a racial gift, like Asano.”

“Sure do,” said Bennett, one of Gerling’s minions.

“Bennett,” Gerling said. “Adrien, here, is going to need some spirit coins. How many coins did we take from the base stockpile in Germany?”

“Roughly?” Bennett asked. “A metric ass-ton.”

## Chapter 441

### Swarm Against Swarm

Jason ducked into one of Shade's bodies and vanished, right before a huge gobbet of webbing splashing into the shadowy familiar. Despite Shade's incorporeal form, the potent magic on the webbing sent him flying backwards and pinned his body to the wall of the vast cavern. The energy in the web rapidly burned away Shade's body, destroying it.

Jason appeared from another of Shade bodies, right underneath the huge creature. He reached overhead to carve his knife through its hair to cut the skin, the long, steel-like bristles scraping his fingers. He shadow-jumped again as it moved to react. Jason's reflexes were already enhanced to the maximum but the spider still caught him with one of the blade-like protrusions on its leg as he jumped.

This boss creature was not that much larger than the normal anomalies in the cave-system territory, but it was much more powerful. It had the full might of a gold-rank monster, complete with exotic abilities. These took the form of special webs, from fire webs that were harmful to Colin to dimensional webs that hurt Shade and Gordon.

Jason had been forced to recall his familiars other than Shade, whose multiplicity of bodies gave him some leeway. Those bodies were being taken down, one by one, though. The advantage of recalling his familiars was that Jason could use the effects he gained from them personally. The two orbs provided by Gordon were valuable shields, intercepting many of the web attacks, although they could only hold up for so long before breaking down and needing to reform.

The spider was also quick and agile for a spider the size of a transit van, but that was unsurprising from a gold-rank greater anomaly. The chitinous blade on its legs were swift and dangerous weapons, bleeding Jason again and again, although never scoring a decisive hit. Gordon's shields soaked the big hits Jason wasn't fast enough to avoid, while the smaller hits were rapidly healed.

The combination of the blood robes Colin gave him and Colin himself boosted Jason's formidable regeneration and drain attacks. Jason afflicted up the spider, hit it with his big damage spell and then drained the curses, diseases, poison and unholy afflictions. This loaded Jason up with powerful recovery effects and the spider with transcendent damage.

True gold-rank power was no joke, however, and that was not enough to finish the job. Jason went through multiple cycles of applying and then draining the sinister afflictions, both to build up a powerful stack of recovery effects on himself and load up the

spider with holy afflictions. Only then did Jason move on to the final stage of the fight, transforming his affliction dagger to its second form, from an unholy dagger to a holy sword.

---

Item: [Penitent, The Blade of Sacrifice] (silver rank, conjured)

*Conjured holy sword for those willing to pay the price for victory in battles to the death (weapon, sword).*

- **Effect:** Attacks refresh any wounding afflictions on the target. Those wounding effects require additional healing to remove.
- **Effect:** Attacks inflict an instance of [Price in Blood]. This affliction is applied equally to the person it is inflicted upon and the person who inflicts it. This affliction cannot be cleansed while a person who shares it is alive and is immediately negated if the person who shares it dies. Dismissing [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice] does not remove this affliction.
- [Price in Blood] (affliction, holy, blood, stacking): Damage between people who share the affliction is increased, including damage sources in place prior to this affliction taking effect. Damage from holy sources is further increased by an additional amount. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

---

Doom Blade's second form was a risk versus reward weapon. The holy affliction it bestowed amplified all damage dealt and received, which is why Jason rarely used it. Only once he was confident in both the afflictions layered on the spider and his own ability to withstand the retaliation did he call it out.

Despite the risks, Jason did not shy from the fight, moving in to strike at the spider, boosting the damage it was suffering with every cut. Finally, Jason opened up with his finisher, Verdict.

*"Mine is the judgement and the judgement is death."*

Amplified by the holy afflictions wracking the spider, the beam of transcendent light came down from the cavern roof like the judgement of a wrathful god, yet even that wasn't enough to eradicate the spider entirely. Its gold-rank resilience proved its might once more, leaving Jason with the very unusual situation of waiting on the cooldown for his finishing move.

Surviving was not the same as thriving, however, and the ruined spider was on the verge of collapse. Just as Jason thought he'd won, the spider exploded with a force that shook the cavern. Stalactites came crashing down and Jason was sent flying, slapping into the cavern wall like a wet newspaper. There was more to the boss anomaly's explosion



than pure force, however. Its ravaged body had transformed into a storm of spiders that scattered through the cavern.

Jason recovered his sensibilities quickly, this being far from the first time he had taken a mighty whack. He quickly took stock, assessing his heavily injured body and discovering the spider swarm encroaching on him. Despite his injuries, he waved his hand, spraying leeches all around to send swarm against swarm. It meant giving up the extra regeneration when he was badly hurt, but the spiders had to be dealt with and Jason had another plan.

Jason's starlight cloak turned into wings and lifted him into the middle of the cavern. There was plenty of room for them to hold him aloft in the massive chamber as Leeches moved to attack spiders.

The spiders, despite being tiny, were still gold rank and didn't fall quickly to Colin's afflictions. Indeed, since Jason was unreachable, they started savaging the leeches, which they outnumbered and outranked. Even so, the game little leeches were apocalypse beasts and did not go down easily.

"That'll do, Colin," Jason said. The leeches gathered into small piles that shot rags up to Jason, then turned into blood and swiftly flowed up the rags to be reabsorbed. Some of the spiders tried climbing up but Jason let the rags dissolve and they dropped to the floor.

Jason picked out a spider and cast a couple of spells in it. Inexorable Doom started immediately multiplying all the afflictions, while Haemorrhage applied the same afflictions as Colin, plus a bonus; the sacrificial victim effect, which made the spiders more susceptible to drain abilities. Jason then called out Gordon and had him send an orb to trigger the butterflies, spreading the afflictions through the spider swarm.

The butterfly swarm spread, its exponential growth overtaking the spiders in number until every spider was loaded with a growing pile of afflictions. Jason was still heavily injured, but there was a solution for that and he cast a spell.

*"Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine on which to feast."*

---

#### Ability: [Feast of Blood] (Blood)

- Spell (drain, blood).
- Base Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.
  
- Current rank: Silver 3 (14%).
  
- Effect (iron): Drain health and stamina. Only affects targets with bleeding wounds or who are suffering from the [Bleeding] affliction.

- Effect (bronze): Drains additional health and stamina for each instance of poison on the target.
  - Effect (silver): Increasing the mana cost to very high and the cooldown to 2 minutes allows this spell to target all viable targets in a wide area.
- 

Life force drained from the spiders and was soaked up by Jason. The gold rank anomalies were small but had life force to spare and the afflictions on them allowed the spell to drain even more. It was more than enough to fully replenish Jason's health.

*"Feed me your sins."*

Jason drained the afflictions from the little spiders the way he had again and again with their larger progenitor. The spiders were left glowing with transcendent energy of blue, gold and silver; a match for Jason's eyes.

The gold-rank spiders were tough but there was still a limit to the vitality in their tiny bodies. Colin's afflictions and Jason drain had stolen much of it and the transcendent damage from the penance affliction burned away the rest. The spiders dissolved into rainbow smoke.

---

- You have defeated [Greater Anomaly].
  - [Greater Anomaly] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.
  - [Sin Orb] has been added to your inventory.
  - 10 [Gold Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 100 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 1,000 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 10,000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - Defeating a higher-ranked monster has provided additional rewards.
  - [Hegemon's Vessel] has been added to your inventory.
  - You have overtaken a genesis space territory and purged all anomalous elements.
  - Return to core territory to initiate transfiguration of new territory.
- 

While Jason was happy to have claimed another territory, his concerns about the future fights continued to grow. This anomaly boss had the strength of a full-flight gold-rank monster, if not an especially powerful one. Even the previous greater anomalies hadn't truly shown the power of their rank but with each territory Jason claimed, the anomalies attacking it grew stronger. It was only a matter of time before even the ordinary anomalies reached that level.

Returning to his palace at the centre of his domain, a small group of newly-transformed celestines approached as Jason arrived on Shade's motorcycle form. Shade returned to Jason's shadow as he started walking past the water fountain roundabout and toward the pagoda.

"Mr Asano," the celestine ringleader said, matching Jason's pace. "We have a lot of nervous and uncertain people, with little idea of what is going on."

"Then I have some bad news for you," Jason said, still walking. "You've got one more than you think."

"We don't know what to do," one of the other celestines pleaded.

"Go back inside and hope I figure out how to save the world. Again. Until then, there's not a lot of point making other plans."

The pagoda doors opened as Jason approached and closed behind him as he went inside.

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"You were rather rude to those people who have undergone quite a lot of trauma," Shade observed as Jason called up a cloud chair to sit in. They were on the balcony of the pagoda's top floor.

"I don't have the time or the energy to be nice," Jason said. "I should have never come here. The vampires are a secondary concern to what I need to do."

"If you weren't here, Mr Asano, who would stabilise this transformation zone?"

"Would it have even have formed if I wasn't here?" Jason asked. "Something triggered it; you felt it, just like I did, and it wasn't the nuke."

"That does not mean it is somehow related to you," Shade said. "That is a conclusion built on far too little evidence."

"Yeah?" Jason asked. "You want to bet on whether this would have happened if I'd stayed out of it?"

"No, thank you," Shade said.

"Exactly."

Jason winced unhappily and closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Shade. You're right. I was rude to them and I was rude to you. I'll go and try to calm them down. In a bit. I'm just so bloody weary. I'm tired of this fight, I'm tired of this world and I'm tired of being responsible for it."

"We both know you won't put those responsibilities down, Mr Asano. Rest, as much as you can. You're going to need it."

“No kidding,” Jason said with a bone-tired chuckle. “I don’t see a path to win this, Shade. I’ve made so many mistakes. I should never have agreed to come here. I should have brought Farrah after I did.”

“There is always a path, Mr Asano. You may not like where it takes you or what you have to do to walk it, but it is always there. Defeating the Builder is something most would consider impossible, yet you’ve done it twice. He tried to claim an astral space and he tried to claim your soul. Despite his personal involvement, he was rebuffed in both instances.”

“Extenuating circumstances.”

“There always are, Mr Asano, or you would not have been in those situations at all. This world was going to rupture with the last abnormal transformation zone, yet you held it together. You’ve created your own spirit domain when your power is still so insignificant. That’s the most impossible thing of all and you don’t even understand what it means, yet.”

“But you do?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to tell me?”

“No. You’ve already placed a foot in a realm you aren’t ready for. I’m not going to place your head in after it. I also suggest you refrain from speaking on it at all once we reach the other world.”

“Fine. You know that in every situation you just listed there were extreme mitigating factors that made what happened possible,” Jason said.

“Which you found and used every time.”

“Actually, that one time it was pretty much all Clive.”

“Do you think those mitigating factors aren’t here to be found now, or are you just too tired to seek them out?” Shade asked. “I hate to break it to you, Mr Asano, but doing the impossible is kind of your thing. To be unfortunately colloquial, it is now time to nut up.”

Jason’s eyes shot open and he stared at Shade.

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Jason made his way down to the celestines. He plastered on what he hoped was a convincingly optimistic expression and tried to settle them as best he could. He was making some headway when he stopped mid sentence, sensing a familiar presence enter his spirit domain.

## 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.

- 
- 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?
- 

“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.”

## Chapter 443

### Balls

"This is the part where we go out and save the world," Mr North said.

He and Jason were still in the mezzanine lounge.

"No," Jason said. "This is the part where you stay here until I come back and get you."

"You have something better to do?"

"Mr North, one of us saved the world from the convergence of an astral space and transformation zone threatening to open a wound in the side of the universe. The other one is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands. Probably millions at this point. Which one of us do you think should be in charge?"

"Really, Mr Asano? Do you think my way or the highway is going to get Gerling and the vampires on board? Don't let your desire to kill us all prevent you from completing the task at hand."

Jason seethed but reluctantly nodded.

"I do have things to do before we take the next step, though," Jason said.

"How do you suggest going about finding the others?" Mr North asked.

"We keep expanding territory," Jason said. "Eventually, they'll be in it."

"I would appreciate being walked through the process before I'm thrown into it."

"I'll do that when I get back, just stay here until then."

"You want me to just sit here and twiddle my thumbs?"

The floor morphed as a table made of cloud-stuff rose from it before solidifying into dark crystal embedded with shifting flecks of blue, silver and gold light. Jason took a notepad and pen from his inventory and dropped them on the table.

"What are these for?" Mr North asked. "A confession of my heinous deeds?"

"You were round in the other universe a long time ago, right?"

"I was."

"How's your memory?"

"I'm gold-rank, Mr Asano. My memory is so good that I could solve crimes alongside a straight-laced detective who can solve any murder except that of her own father."

"You think pop-culture references will win me over?"

"My research on you suggests it's worth a try. How's it working?"

"Better than I'd like," Jason admitted. "You know about the Order of the Reaper?"

"Reaper cultists. Assassins. Lost their way and became politically ambitious. Some kind of internal schism."

“Write down everything you remember. It might prove useful when I go back.”

“And why would I do that for you?”

“A gesture of goodwill. Or don’t do it; that’s up to you.”

Jason moved over to the elevating platform, his face still filled with frustration as it lifted him into the other levels. Once he was out of Mr North’s sight, the expression vanished and a smile curled at his lips.

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Jack Gerling slumped against a jungle tree, exhausted.

“You did good, Jack,” said Bennett, one of Gerling’s silver-rank companions. The others were off gathering up the dead anomalies for Barbou to use looting rituals on. Given the numbers, Barbou had been using the largest ritual circles he could make work to loot the anomalies in piles.

In the jungle territory they were currently in, it was hard to find an open space to perform the ritual. They had resorted to hauling them all back to the previous territory Gerling had claimed, which was a wooden town on stilts set in shallow water. There was a town hall there with enough open space to manage.

Gerling recovered quickly. With his gold-rank recovery attribute, the wounds he suffered at the hands of the boss anomaly closed quickly. It also rapidly purged the giant snake’s poison and replenished Gerling’s stamina. Approaching the giant anomaly, he threw his arms around it, just under the head, and started dragging it back to be looted as well.

The looting rituals took hours, during which Gerling and his people left Barbou to work. As the anomalies weren’t monsters, they didn’t dissolve on their own an hour or so after death, giving Barbou time to get through them all. Gerling left Bennett and another flunky to watch Barbou as he and the others returned to the heart of Gerling’s territory. Bennet would collect all the loot in his dimensional space when Barbou was done and follow.

Gerling’s central territory had originally been a village of undersized cottages, the anomalies taking the form of a horde of tiny people. Once he claimed it, it stayed small but transformed into an undersized, cyberpunk-style slum. Neon buildings and miniaturised strip joints spread out in a rat’s nest of streets and alleys, with the humans walking through them like giants.

The only normal-sized building was a tower of glass and steel at the centre; the core of Gerling’s domain. At the top of the tower was a luxurious penthouse where Gerling went

to rest. The rest of his team not tasked with monitoring Barbou stayed in smaller, but no less opulent apartments a floor below.

When Bennett brought back Barbou, he delivered the fresh pile of rainbow orbs looted from the anomalies. They were piled high on the floor, along with the orbs unused from before.

“Well, Jack,” Bennett said, slapping Gerling on the shoulder as they looked over the mound of spheres. “No one can deny you’ve got balls.”

Gerling snorted a laugh. He didn’t know what they were called but Gerling knew they were the refined versions of the black and red orbs that had turned Tran into a vampire and Guo into a tentacle monster. After witnessing those events it had been a risk to use the rainbow variant, but Gerling had been right. They were the key to seizing control of the transformation space.

He was certain that Asano was out there, somewhere in the transformation zone. He didn’t know what would happen when the territories met, but Gerling was confident. With each territory expansion, the anomalies attacking had grown stronger but Gerling had managed to kill three of the boss monsters. From each, he had gained a magical orb that had allowed him to unlock his powers. He knew Asano would have to deal with the same challenges, alone and at silver rank.

Gerling had used two of the power-unlocking orbs and now Bennett had just delivered a third. The first power unlocked was from his vast essence and wouldn’t have been Gerling’s first choice. It was a leaping power that was useful for mobility and let him build up power for enhanced attacks with the leap. It made for a good opening move against larger and slower enemies like the anomaly bosses, but there were many more powers Gerling would have rather chosen over it. His goal was Asano, who was elusive enough that such a power was of little use.

The second power he unlocked was more useful. From the potent essence, it allowed allies within his aura to boost their base attributes by consuming mana. Since their powers were all locked, giving them something to spend their mana on was valuable. At gold rank, the additional features of the power allowed the affected allies to add weakening effects to their attacks. It made them burn their mana even faster, but a silver-ranker not using their essence abilities had mana to spare.

This had been a real boon claiming the territory they had just completed. Since Gerling’s aura covered the entirety of his domain, this allowed his people to use the effect anywhere within it. They were able to spread out and confront the weaker anomalies in

small groups or even alone. They were mostly combat elites trained by the excellent US training programs.

Gerling wanted as many unlocked powers as he could get when he faced Asano. He had underestimated the silver-ranker once and was determined not to do so again. He took the latest orb and absorbed it, feeling the fog sealing another of his ability part like mist in the sunlight. He let out a sinister chuckle as he felt his Immortality power awaken once more.

His gaze turned back to the pile of rainbow orbs on the floor. It was time for the next expansion.

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Jason sat on the top floor of the pagoda. He hadn't yet looked at his latest haul from the spider anomaly or triggered the transfiguration of his latest competed territory. The sin orb that would otherwise have unlocked his powers should be enough to finish charging his eye of doom item, so he took both out and let the eye absorb the other sphere.

- 
- Eye of Doom has accumulated power.
  - Current power: 100%
  - [Eye of Doom] is fully empowered. It may be consumed

Item: [Eye of Doom] (unranked, legendary)

*Contains the potential to bestow spirit domains with the power of doom (consumable, awakening stone).*

- Requirements: Spirit domain, [Doom] essence.
- Effect: Consuming the [Eye of Doom] will add additional effects to your spirit domain.

---

Jason looked at the description. He was sure that it previously said it would add a single passive effect, not multiple general effects. He couldn't help but wonder what changed. Was there something specific about the orbs he was feeding it or was something else at work?

Jason leaned back into the plush cloud chair and considered the item in his hands. The unexpected change made him wary, but it should be safe to use, nonetheless. His identification ability had been unable to show him the effects of powerful items before, but



it had never hidden effects entirely. The Eye of Doom, despite the sinister name, should be safe. The only questions were about the specific effects it would grant. Was there some side effect of a power that was somehow prohibitive?

It was hardly the first time that a description had changed on him. His system was not an objective assessment of the world around him but a function of his own abilities; a power he possessed to sense the world around him that was coloured by his attitudes and unconscious perceptions. He often wondered how affected it was by his conditions and moods. It had always proven trustworthy, yet was, in some ways, an unreliable narrator.

Even with those concerns, Jason once more put his trust in the ability, absorbing the eye, confident that it wouldn't harm him. The orb melted into his hand and vanished. Jason's head was immediately filled with searing pain, as if someone had scooped out his eyes, tipped his head back and was pouring a stream of lava into each socket.

Jason came to his senses, sprawled in his chair and uncertain of how long he had been suffering. He minimised the message window for the moment, letting out a groan as he stayed slumped where he was. One of Shade's bodies stood in front of him.

"How are you feeling, Mr Asano?"

"Like Farrah's magma elemental tried to shag my eye sockets."

Jason opened his eyes.

"Have they changed again?" he asked.

"It does seem to be a regular occurrence, Mr Asano. I know that unconventional eyes are not especially rare in essence users but the regularity with which yours change is reaching the point where I'm becoming concerned."

"Should I be concerned too?"

Jason's eyes still ached, although the mind-shattering pain was gone.

"Do recall that truly permanent change is not to the body but to the soul. Your soul has been hammered into shape more than anyone else I've encountered. You've been carrying heavy burdens and you need time to stop and rest. Real time; not the lull between crises."

"I'm trying to save the world, here, Shade. There's another world waiting and I can rest when I get there."

"I know, Mr Asano. But please keep in mind that it's a soul, not a whittling stick."

Gordon manifested himself and leaned down, positioning his dark, empty hood in front of Jason's face.

"Gordon?"

"You may want to check your eyes, Mr Asano," Shade said.

“Yeah, alright. Excuse me, Gordon.” Gordon moved aside and a stream of cloud-stuff rose from the floor and took the form of a long mirror. Jason looked into his own eyes, seeing they were now eye-shaped nebulas, identical to the one dominating the otherwise empty space inside Gordon’s cloak.

“Oh, nice,” Jason said turning his head side to side. “These look a lot more like eyes. Less uncanny valley. What do you think, Gordon? Thumbs up?”

One of Gordon’s orbiting eye spheres lit up blue, which was his signal for yes.

“Okay,” Jason said. “The cosmetic changes are a winner, if still a bit stingy. I thought the idea was for my spirit domain to get new stuff, though.”

“Your spirit domains are an extension of yourself,” Shade said.

“Fair enough.”

Jason pulled the previously ignored message window back up.

- 
- You have incorporated the [Eye of Doom] into your spirit vault. This has added additional effects to your spirit domains.
  - Hostile individuals that enter, leave and re-enter your spirit domain immediately regain all previous negative effects inflicted by the spirit domain. Leaving the domain again will still remove all effects.
  - You may remotely view any location within your spirit domain. This vision cannot be foiled or avoided by any effect. At your current rank, this ability cannot be used across dimensional barriers.
  - You may exacerbate the effects of your spirit domain on any individual you can see within it, either in person or via remote viewing.

---

“That would have been nice to have before those gold-rank pricks went digging my other place up.”

Jason closed his eyes and sent his vision skimming through his domain. He instinctively understood how and didn’t find it disorienting at all. Reaching his latest territory, not yet fully claimed, reminded him of the task at hand. He returned his vision to his own body.

“One last goody and then we get back to work,” Jason said, pulling out the other item looted from the anomaly boss. It was another orb, this one composed of familiar dark crystal flecked with gold, silver and blue light.

---

Item: [Vessel of the Hegemon] (unranked, legendary)

*Forge of the divine chariot (consumable, awakening stone).*

- Requirements: Transcendent rank or growth-type vehicle or construct intrinsically connected to an entity with a spirit domain.
  - Effect: Converts the interior of the vehicle or constructed into an extension of the connected entity's spirit domain.
- 

"Huh," Jason said, looking at the sphere in his hand. "Forge of the divine chariot? It's a ball. Ever seen an item like this, Shade?"

"I have not," Shade said. "It is not unusual for a looting power to produce something specifically tailored to the looter, however."

"It was a bonus item for taking down something higher-rank than me, so I guess that makes sense. Not sure how useful it is, though. Also, I'm not in love with the term 'looter.' It makes me sound like I smash-and-grabbed a television."

Jason plucked the miniaturised cloud flask from his necklace and it expanded to normal size. It was a round-bottomed flask with a cylindrical neck, filled with swirling white and blue energy. Jason placed the vessel of the hegemon orb on it like an oversized stopper and the orb immediately started dissolving, getting sucked into the flask. The energy inside the flask transformed, taking on the nebula eye form it now shared with both Gordon and Jason.

"That was pretty straightforward. We'll have to wait until we're back out where I left the cloud boat before we can see how it went."

Jason touched the flask to his neck chain and it shrank back down, reattaching itself. Then he closed his eyes, which were starting to feel better, and spread his senses out over his domain.

---

- Initiate transfiguration of new territory Y/N?
- 

"Yes."

## 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.”

## Chapter 445

### That Passion Didn't Come From Nowhere

Jason and Mr North were in an air-conditioned building at the edge of Jason's territory, watching the border where it met the claimed territory of persons yet unknown. It was one of the surface buildings of Jason's city, chosen for the second-storey viewpoint through a large window. They were relaxing in comfortable chairs.

The boundary was represented by a dark blue curtain of energy until, after several hours, it started to retract. The space in between the territories started once more filling with gloom.

"What's happening?" Mr North said.

"Whoever claimed that territory can't hold it. They've retreated into their completed territory and the claimed land is shrinking."

"What should we do?" Mr North asked.

"How confident are you about taking on those messengers?"

"You and I make a good team, Mr Asano. My abilities are more about control than power, while you are an affliction specialist. Given enough time, you can kill even gold-rank enemies. I can reliably pin down three at a time, maybe four. You have no problems with those numbers, correct?"

"Yeah, that's not an issue."

"Then I would say we can probably face up to six at a time. Seven would be a fight and more than that is entering perilous territory."

"So, the danger is adds."

"Adds?"

"Extra monsters wandering in while we're already dealing with others."

"Ah, then yes. I'm afraid that, despite your considerable potency, eliminating even helpless gold rankers is not a swift proposition for you. It's impressive enough that you can manage it at all but time will not be our friend."

"Keeping the fights down to six or less should be manageable," Jason said. "We stay mobile, pick off the isolated ones. Remember that they're not genuine messengers; they're anomalies and will act as such. Right now, they'll be invading the established territory of whoever tried the claim theirs."

"So, we play vulture," Mr North said. "Picking the bones of what's left behind."

"Yes, although I don't know how this will work," Jason said. "I've never had to contest a territory before. I wish saving the world had fewer learn-by-doing scenarios."

They left the building and moved over to the gloom.

- 
- You are at the border of your spirit domain. Minimum cost to expand: 431 [Stable Genesis Cores].
  - Adjacent territory has been expanded into by a nascent spirit domain. Also expanding into this territory will cause it to be contested.
  - Claiming a contested territory requires the destruction of all normal anomalies, the greater anomaly that will manifest once all normal anomalies are destroyed and the defeat of the other claimant. Defeat can take to form of surrender or death.
  - Expand your domain Y/N?
- 

“Yes.”

\*\*\*

Strips of leather shot out from Jason’s blood robe, wrapping around the wings of a messenger from behind. He contracted the strips, squeezing the wings and yanking himself into the air. He landed both feet heavily into the angelic anomaly’s back, using the momentum to stab into it with his conjured sword, held in a backwards, two-handed grip. Despite the added force, it barely dug into the gold-rank anomaly’s flesh.

- 
- Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding], [Leech Toxin], and [Tainted Meridians].
  - Target is already suffering from [Bleeding]. [Bleeding] has been refreshed.
  - Weapon [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice] has inflicted [Price in Blood].
  - Weapon [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice] has refreshed all wounding effects of the target. All wounding effects on the target require additional healing to remove.
- 

The messenger flexed its wings, easily snapping the leather straps giving Jason the leverage to press his feet into its back. Immediately, its plunge towards the ground was arrested and its body flashed with blinding light. Everything went white.

- 
- You have been afflicted with [Blinding Light].
- 

Jason immediately used his cloak as a shadow to teleport through, emerging from one of Shade’s bodies that were scattered around the battlefield; an open-air temple amphitheatre. Shade was playing decoy and serving as a shadow jump platform for Jason. The gold-rank light attacks of the messengers were highly effective against the shadow familiar, however. This had thinned out the numbers of Shade's available bodies.

Gordon transformed into a nebula cloud and dashed to Jason's side, transforming the orbs floating around him into shields and using them to shelter Jason. Jason reached out blindly to Gordon, the incorporeal familiar's touch tingling his fingers.

---

➤ You have bestowed all instances of [Guardian's Blessing] to [Avatar of Doom].

---

Beams of light came searing down on them, Jason was protected by Gordon's shields and Gordon by the barriers from Jason's amulet. Jason had passed them along as the light beams were dangerous to Gordon, who had used all his orb shields to protect Jason and left himself exposed. Gordon lacked the spare bodies that Shade possessed, so Jason passed along his amulet's protection.

Neither Gordon's layered shields nor the amulet's protective blessing lasted long, the light beams burrowing through them in short order. There was just enough delay for the blinding effect to pass and Jason reabsorbed Gordon before the familiar took more hits. Jason suffering a couple himself as he went on the move again.

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"I'm sorry that one got loose," Mr North said as he and Jason sprawled on the amphitheatre steps. "Constraining four at once is trickier than I had hoped."

"There were eight of them," Jason said. "It was always going to be a rough fight."

"I have touched all the bodies, Mr Asano," Shade said.

"Thanks, Shade."

Shade was able to serve as a vessel through which Jason could use his non-combat abilities. Most often that meant sharing his cloak or shadow jumping without line of sight, but it also allowed Shade to tag fallen enemies for looting. Jason had another use for the dead anomalies first, however.

Most of Shade's bodies had been taken out in the fight. It would take a considerable amount of mana to replace them all but his Blood Harvest spell could reap mana from the dead. Even so, by the time he had drained the remnant life force from the bodies, Shade was still seven bodies short of his maximum.

"Time to go," Jason said as he triggered his looting power and the anomalies started dissolving into rainbow smoke.

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Jason pulled out his phone and checked the time. Farrah had modified it so that it would still function inside his dimensional storage, preventing it from entering stasis.

"Nineteen hours," he said.

“Nineteen hours?” Mr North asked. They were resting after yet another fight with messenger anomalies.

“Since we were scouting this territory out and the other side claimed it,” Jason said. “A little over nineteen hours.”

Mr North looked up at the sky.

“Bright sunshine, the whole time.”

“Days and nights don’t obey the normal rules, here,” Jason said. “If territories aren’t linked, you step from one to the other and go from day to night. I think this territory might not have a night at all.”

“If the person trying to claim this territory wasn’t Gerling but a vampire,” Mr North reasoned, “that would explain why they failed to do much about the messengers. The light powers they possess would be bad for vampires even without perpetual, gold-rank sunlight.”

“It would explain why they retreated into their own territory and left so many messengers for us to find. If a vampire is making territory, I bet there’s an awful lot of night going on.”

“You can shape the territory you claim like that?”

“It’s subconscious, but when you transfigure a completely seized territory, I suspect it reflects on you in certain ways. I can’t imagine a vampire with a spirit domain that’s full of sunshine. Even a nascent spirit domain.”

“Nascent?”

“I think my impact on this space is allowing others to go through the process I went through of slowly developing the power to make a spirit domain. I’ve already completed that path, but I’m not sure they can.”

“Why not?” Mr North asked.

“Because I’ve already claimed too much territory. They would need to take it from me to claim enough for themselves to complete the ability, but this place had my domain from the beginning. I think it might be the anchor making what they’re doing possible. I could be wrong, but I think without my domain defining the rules for this space, they would no longer be able to claim new territories.”

“So they think that they’re doing what you did, but it’s doomed to fail.”

“I could be wrong. I don’t think so, though. There’s a feel to this place, like being in node space.”

“Which requires the Builder’s magic door to manipulate.”

“It’s my door now, and it’s actively working on this space.”

“It makes sense,” Mr North said. “The transformation zones are flaws in the original Builder’s work. The seams coming apart as the dimensional membrane of this world thins and cracks.”

Both men turned their heads as they sensed a new aura emerge from the edge of the contested space.

“The greater anomaly,” Jason said. “The other anomalies spawned here must have been killed in the fully claimed space.”

- 
- All normal anomalies have been eradicated. If the other claimant to the contested space is not within the space when the greater anomaly is destroyed, it will count as surrendering the territory.
- 

“Oh, nice,” Jason said. “The other guy has to come to us.”

“They don’t have your ability to inform them of the situation,” Mr North said. “Will they even realise?”

“You know what magic’s like. You let instinct guide you. They’ll figure it out, sadly.”

\*\*\*

The greater anomaly looked much like the other messengers: a winged, androgynous humanoid draped in loose linens. It was larger than their normal two-metre height, Jason estimating around two and a half. The starkest difference was an additional set of gold-coloured wings, alongside the normal white ones.

Jason and Mr North remained hidden, suppressing their auras to the maximum. To assist in this, Mr North had drawn out a ritual circle in webbing that would contain not just telltale auras but also sounds, scents and magic. They had decided to wait out the other claimant on the territory, rather than try and down the boss before they arrived. If they were in the middle of a brutal fight when the other party arrived, they’d be fighting on two fronts, half-exhausted or worse.

“What do we do if the other person has the same idea?” Mr North asked. “If I were a vampire looking to swoop in and take advantage, I’d be hovering just outside the contested space, waiting to strike. Preferably, through a minion. Either that or give up because of the sunlight and move on to the next opportunity.”

“Perhaps, but I don’t think so,” Jason said. “What you don’t feel is the connection to a territory you’ve claimed. You establish a link to your soul; giving it up is like cutting off a finger.”

“Vampires might give up a finger to stay out of the sun when the magic is this strong. When there’s a boss monster and unknown enemies hidden somewhere, certainly.”



"I guess we'll see," Jason said.

\*\*\*

The territory claimant turned out to be the necromancer, as identified by Mr North.

"Why would gold-rank vampires permit a silver-rank essence user to be the one to forge a spirit domain?" Jason said. "Territorialism is in the blood."

"My guess would be the need for someone who could withstand the sun."

The necromancer did not sneak into the contested zone, instead, arriving amidst a ghoulish horde. Hundreds, if not thousands of ghouls emerged into the contested space. Neither Jason nor Mr North thought bronze-rank ghouls would let a silver-ranker beat a flying gold-rank entity, but they were swiftly proven wrong.

Rather than as a fighting force, the necromancer used the ghouls as an energy source, drawing energy from them to fuel incredibly powerful magic attacks. With his first attack, as many as a dozen ghouls dropped, their magic completely drained as a sickly green energy emerged from them, gathered together over the necromancer and was flung at the anomaly. Even as those ghouls dropped, more came pouring across the territorial border.

The messenger returned in kind, complex magical diagrams appearing in front of it to amplify its magical blasts. Amazingly, the silver-rank necromancer held his own, drawing on more and more of the ghouls to create powerful magic blasts or a green magic shield to protect himself.

Jason's face curled into a snarl as more and more ghouls appeared, the number heading towards two thousand as they formed a sea of undead.

"Calm yourself," Mr North counselled. "You can't do anything for those people now."

"How many?" Jason asked. "How many people died for this sick piece of...?"

"Mr Asano, in this moment we need to be focused on his power. Obviously, the ghouls are a finite resource, but so long as he has them, he commands considerable combat strength."

"It's simple strength," Jason said.

"Or perhaps he's using it simply. Have you ever fought a necromancer, Mr Asano?"

"No."

"I suggest you avoid it if possible. They are amongst those essence users least concerned with confronting an affliction specialist. Along with powerful resistances, they often have powers allowing them to shunt all the afflictions they suffer onto their unliving minions. It's likely that even if you caught him in a sneak attack, he'd pass your afflictions onto a ghoulish minion."

“Assuming he has such a power unsealed.”

“Assuming, yes. Whatever the conditions, though, never forget that a necromancer is as strong as his undead are plentiful. You would need to eliminate his ghouls before moving onto the necromancer.”

“I’ve killed thousands of undead before.”

“Not while the man who animated them is right there. The correct approach is negotiation.”

“And if he tries to kill us?”

“Then we do what we must.”

“That’s not a comprehensive plan.”

“Step one is helping him fight. As distasteful as it is, Mr Asano, we will need the power he taps into through the ghouls for the fights to come. We have to help him in this fight so that resource might be preserved.”

“That ‘resource’ is people. People he herded up, killed and turned into twisted puppets.”

“Yes. We’re here to save the world, Mr Asano. You need to come to terms with the fact that there is no line we can’t cross in the face of that.”

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The ghouls parted like the red sea and the necromancer walked towards Jason and Mr North, who were standing by the body of the greater anomaly.

“Mr North,” the necromancer said. “It’s been so very long.”

“You’ll have to forgive me if I’ve forgotten your name across the years,” Mr North said.

“You don’t forget things, Mr North. You never knew my name. Never cared. You were always obsessed with your human augmentation projects, with no time for my art. All anyone calls me now is the Necromancer, and you may do the same. There is a validating singularity to it.”

The Necromancer turned to Jason.

“And the famous Jason Asano. That’s quite the intimidating aura you have there. You really do want to kill me, don’t you? Is it true that you’ve come back from the dead?”

“You won’t.”

“Hardly diplomatic, yet you are restraining the urge. You don’t think you can beat me with my little pets here.”

Jason’s face was hidden under his hood but his aura practically trembled with fury.

“We’re here because we need your help,” Mr North said.

“My help?”

“This place must be consolidated into one domain,” Mr North said. “None of us are strong enough alone, which is what truly restrains Mr Asano. Caution isn’t really his thing.”

“So, you are here to surrender your territory to me?” the Necromancer asked.

“It doesn’t work like that,” Mr North said.

“What are you even doing here?” the Necromancer asked. “Why are you running around with him?”

“I was caught up in this while on other business, although it has proven for the best. If we don’t all work together, not only do we all die but the world goes with us. Whatever means you may have developed to preserve yourself through death is unlikely to survive that.”

“And I’m to take your word for it?”

“Either that or fight,” Mr North said.

“Even assuming you’re telling the truth, why can’t I be the one to claim this domain?”

“Because Asano’s domain is the only thing making that possible,” Mr North said. “His domain goes, so does yours. It feels like you’re gaining power for yourself, but it’s an echo of his.”

“What makes you so sure?” the Necromancer asked.

“Because I’m the one who brought the power he’s using into this world.”

“He can just hand it over to me, then. So long as someone has it.”

“If only it were that easy. Asano didn’t just take the power but absorbed it. It was quite the surprise, believe me. It’s part of him, now, and not coming out.”

“I’ve taken lots of parts that weren’t meant to come out from people.”

“Maybe you could, with enough resources and a decade of astral magic theory. We don’t have time for that, however.”

“What do I get for my participation, then?” the Necromancer asked.

“Amnesty,” Mr North said.

“THE HELL HE DOES!” Jason roared. “You expect me to just let this guy go, after what he’s done?”

“I’m hardly incentivised to go along then,” the Necromancer said. “I’m better off betting that you’re lying, North, and taking all the power for myself.”

“We can’t let you go,” Mr North said, glancing to Jason. “That’s a bridge too far for Mr Asano, I’m afraid. Your research has doubtless shone some light on medical magic, however. Perhaps even medical science. We’re offering you the Nazi scientist deal. You’ll be quietly left to conduct your research, even funded.”

“You expect me to go along with this?” Jason asked.

“Yes. I’m sorry, Mr Asano, but this is how it has to be. We need him, so we have to make compromises.”

Jason’s eyes glimmered in his dark hood but he didn’t respond.

“Jason,” Mr North said. “We have to hear you say it.”

Jason turned to the Necromancer looking at him for a long time. He was wearing a long, outlandish purple coat. It left him looking as if he were cosplaying a necromancer instead of actually being one. He had the usual polished and youthful features of a silver-ranker, with no indication of any bizarre alterations he had made to his body using his dark arts.

“Fine,” Jason finally spat out.

“I said we have to hear you say it,” Mr North said.

There was a long silence.

“Mr Asano, at least you can pick which Network branch he ends up with. You want the Americans or the Chinese to have him.”

“I want the grave to have him.”

“Not an option. Remember the stakes.”

A low growl came from Jason’s hood.

“Amnesty,” he said bitterly. “The Nazi scientist deal. You have my word.”

Jason spat out the last words like they were poison and Mr North let out a sigh of relief. He then turned back to the Necromancer.

“I know it’s not ideal,” he said. “But it’s the only chance you have at a future. We live long lives.”

\*\*\*

When the Necromancer finally agreed, it surrendered not just the contested space but his entire domain.

- 
- Your spirit domain has absorbed a nascent domain.
  - 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: 83.9%
  - Return to core territory to initiate transfiguration of new territories.
- 

At Mr North's suggestion, they rested back in Jason's underground city. North made sure that Jason and the Necromancer were thoroughly separated before checking on

Jason. He found him in a room, the anger he showed the necromancer nowhere to be seen.

“Too much?” Jason asked.

“A little hammy, but you do passion quite authentically. It will play well to a necromancer wearing an enormous purple coat.”

Jason didn't smile.

“That passion didn't come from nowhere.”

## Chapter 446

### The Upstart Magician

“The necromancer was surprisingly easy to get on board,” Jason said. “It’s likely that the powers we’ve seen are the extent of his unlocked abilities.”

“Perhaps,” Mr North said. “Or perhaps he wasn’t so much eager to join our side as to leave the one he was on. It takes an unusual gold-rank vampire to put aside their instinct to dominate and get along with each other, which is not a good environment for a disempowered silver-rank essence user. You sensed his aura; the necromancer is a lot more desperate than he lets on.”

Jason nodded. They were still resting in Jason’s futuristic underground city after slogging through the angelic domain of the messengers. That domain was a ring around the space previously belonging to the necromancer and now surrendered to Jason. Its perpetual daylight was a cage, trapping the vampires inside it.

The original astral space had been perfect for vampires; the bleak, sunless light had been harmless. Now everything had changed and high-magic sunlight would severely weaken them, rendering them vulnerable to anomalies, let alone people like Jason and Mr North.

The necromancer had already explained his experiences in the transformation zone under questioning from Jason and Mr North. They were reflective of Jason’s experiences in the first transformation zone. He had awoken alone and discovered that his abilities were sealed right before being attacked by anomalies.

He was able to handle the early, weak anomalies and, like Jason, he had a looting power. Humans received a racial gift evolution from each essence they awakened and the necromancer’s death essence evolved a looting power that let him claim the spoils of death.

The looting power was how the necromancer had managed to reach silver-rank over the years, cutting deals with smaller Network branches. Always at the mercy of the International Committee and the larger branches for resources, there was no shortage of groups looking to trade monster cores for the use of a loot power.

This looting power led to the necromancer, like Jason before him, discovering the stable genesis cores. Using them, the necromancer claimed his first territory. When expanding into his second, he found ghouls and vampires alike locked in some kind of stasis. Using his knowledge of necromantic ritual magic, he was able to awaken the

ghouls, gaining control of them in the process and using them to fully claim his second territory.

He had not intended to wake the vampires but the power of the anomalies grew with each territory. In the third territory, the power of the anomalies was enough that even thousands of ghouls would have been chewed through eventually. The orb from the greater anomaly in the second territory had awoken the power to drain the necromantic energy from the ghouls and use it as a weapon. The ghouls were a finite resource, however, making it no more efficient than letting the anomalies kill them.

The vampires he had found in elaborate coffins, underground in a crypt. He decided to awaken them to help him handle the increasingly dangerous anomalies while recognising the danger the bloodsuckers themselves represented. He had hoped that he could control them like the ghouls, but he went in knowing that they were likely too powerful for that. The ghouls were inherently subservient to necromantic commands, which was how the vampires controlled them. Vampires, on the other hand, were made to rule.

After some internal debate, he had chosen to awaken all five vampires at once. He knew that even if he woke just one, he would still not be its match and it would likely kill the others and control him. By waking all five, they would be warier of each other than him. His leverage was that they would need him, so none would allow any of the others to fully control him, which granted him a measure of agency.

The fact that vampires could not naturally manipulate mana like an essence user meant they were unable to use the genesis cores to claim territories. This gave the necromancer more leverage and his role had been to open new domains. He would lead the anomalies back to the Necromancer's core domain where the power of the vampires could handle them.

The necromancer's territory was a land of perpetual night, much as the messenger territory was one of perpetual day. This suited the vampires perfectly. This methodology allowed the necromancer to claim his third territory with ease, but then they encountered the messengers.

Not only was it a realm of clear skies and sunlight, but the anomalies were far more powerful than ever before. With each territory, they had grown stronger but this went from a step up to a soaring leap. Only after speaking with Jason did he realise that Jason's domain was now adjacent to the messenger territory and the anomaly strength was based on that. With seven territories claimed, the enemies were naturally much more powerful.

Jason was able to transfigure even the surrendered territory of the necromancer but had not yet done so. He was waiting until after attempting to recruit the vampires for that. If nothing else, he couldn't be certain what being in the transfiguration area would do to them, although he suspected it would be lethal.

\*\*\*

Jason could sense the necromancer roaming about the underground city and sent a Shade that he then shadow-jumped through.

"I wouldn't have expected it to be so big," the necromancer said. They were in a public area that was a massive internal space across a half-dozen levels, like a giant mall. Metal surfaces were everywhere, in silvery steel, along with smoothly polished stone. Slightly red-tinted lights lit up the cavernous space.

"Time to go," Jason said.

"Do you always go around with that hood up?" the necromancer asked, looking at him.

"I'm not sure a guy in a purple coat who calls himself 'The Necromancer,' should be casting chuuni stones."

"What's a chuuni stone?"

Jason shook his head, pulled his hood back to reveal his face and gripped the Necromancer's upper arm.

- 
- **Todd 'The Necromancer' Halverson.**
  - **Essence user (human, silver rank).**
  - **Essence ability advancement impediment (monster core taint): 94%.**
- 

Darkness emerged from Jason's shadow to take the form of a sinister black golf cart.

"Get on the golf cart, Todd."

\*\*\*

Jason, Mr North and Todd the necromancer were in a car driving through the now-empty streets of the messenger city.

"What can we expect from the vampires?" Jason asked.

"I'm not sure," Todd said. "Your aura will have replaced mine in blanketing my domain, right? Combined with that ring of sunlight around the outside, they'll probably be agitated. I don't think we should be dealing with a bunch of ancient, agitated vampires."

"We won't be," Jason said. "I will."

They found Todd's ghoul army standing around where he left them. Compared to their normal, barely-controllable ravenousness, they stood as if in a daze. They were



located where they had fought the greater anomaly, next to the border between the messenger territory and that of Todd's former domain. The car pulled to a stop in front of them.

"If we end up fighting the vampires, I can't contribute without the ghouls," Todd said.

"We aren't fighting the vampires," Jason said. "We're just going to talk. If I can get them on board, I'll bring them out. Otherwise, I'll transfigure the whole space they're in and see what that does to them."

"I would advise against lying," Todd said. "The vampire's aura sensitivity is high and they're very powerful. They'll know if you aren't telling them the truth."

The dividing line between the two territories was stark, despite both being part of Jason's domain now. Looking up into the sky, there was a line where the blue sky suddenly transitioned to black night, the sunlight stopping dead. In the realm of darkness, the ground was dark soil, devoid of life. Black, purple and grey ziggurats and towers punctuated the landscape, their architecture gothic and almost organic.

"Looks like territory claimed by the undead faction in a strategy game," Jason said.

"I know, right?" Todd said. "So badass."

Jason pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Is this what I sound like to other people?" Jason asked Mr North.

"More or less."

"Bugger."

Mr North walked up to the border, stepping back and forth over it as he looked around.

"How very unusual," he observed. "Are you going to send your familiar to speak by proxy, Mr Asano? That would be safest."

"No need," Jason said. "They're already watching us. And listening."

"Oh? I don't sense them."

"They're in my domain, now," Jason said. "I've known where they were at every moment since Todd surrendered his territories."

Five figures emerged from behind nearby buildings. They looked warily at the sunlit other side as they approached the border but their auras gave away no emotions. One was wearing what looked like a period costume, much like the vampire Farrah and Dawn fought in Australia. The other three male vampires wore modern, exquisitely-tailored suits in black, black and black. The solitary woman wore a formal but contemporary ball gown of vibrant red. Somehow, it had remained immaculately clean.

One of the suited vampires spoke as they drew close to the border where night met day.

“You’ve turned coat, Necromancer.”

“For the moment,” Jason said, “there is only one side. We all live or die together.”

The vampires dismissed the necromancer. With his lack of power, without his domain and with his clear subordination to Jason, he vanished from the vampires' attention. That was instead turned directly onto Jason.

The vampires could not cross the border without being weakened but the same could not be said for their auras. Five overbearing gold rank auras pressed over and onto Jason. His eyes glowed brightly as he drew on his aura which suffused the entire domain. Even the five gold rank auras were pressed like boats before a tsunami, crashing back so forcefully that the vampires were literally staggered.

“Make no mistake,” Jason said. “Your choice is not join or fight. It's join or die.”

“Join what?” the female vampire asked. “Who are you?”

“My name is Jason Asano.”

“The upstart magician,” one of the suited vampires said. “You were behind the events in Great Moravia.”

“Great Moravia?” Jason asked.

“Slovakia,” the female vampire said. “Do try and learn the new names, Wassily.”

“Andrei said it was Great Moravia. Russian imbecile.”

“I thought you were Russian,” the vampire next to him said.

“I'm Polish.”

“Isn't that basically the same thing?”

“I'LL KILL YOU, YOU SON OF A DOG!”

With a flash of gold-rank speed, Wassily had the other vampire gripped by the jacket.

“Wassily,” Elizabeth said. Her softly spoken word was carried on a wave of aura that stopped Wassily dead.

“Fine,” Wassily spat, shoving the other vampire away.

“You got lucky, Wassily,” the vampire said.

“That's enough,” Elizabeth said. “From you as well, Klaus.”

“Who even cares what the place is called, Elizabeth?” Wassily asked, returning to the previous topic. “The names will change when we divide the lands between ourselves.”

“I would advise against counting unearned spoils,” Elizabeth said and turned back to Jason.

“Did you cause all this to happen to destroy our operations, here?” she asked.

“No,” Jason said. “I did come here to sabotage your operations, but not like this. One of my enemies thought they could eliminate us all together while I was in here, not realising what their actions would bring about. The events here threaten to destroy the entire world.”

“It isn’t possible to destroy the world,” one of the vampires said. “Nothing has that much power.”

“Not only is it possible,” Jason said, “but I’m not even certain it’s avoidable. Have you ever gone to a high-up point and looked deep into the gloom beyond claimed territory?”

“Giant shapes in the dark,” Elizabeth said.

“That is what awaits us at the end,” Jason said. “I don’t know what they are, but that’s what we’ll have to deal with. I barely held things together the last time, in Slovakia, and I never went as far as finding and confronting whatever waits at the end. That time, because I didn’t finish the job, the world was shaken.”

“The increase in magic across the world,” Elizabeth said.

“Yes. The world cannot take another shake like that. If you want there to be a world left to rule, you need to add your strength and ours. There is also a powerful essence-user somewhere in here, and even altogether, we may not be enough.”

Jason felt the eyes of the vampires on him. Their auras did not attack again but they picked over his own, looking for the telltale inconsistencies of deceit. They sensed the strength with which he restrained his emotions, terrifyingly strong for his rank. They could taste his frustration at needing their help and being forced to ask for it. The anger at being forced to let them go in return for their assistance when he would never have a better circumstance to fight them instead. They sensed him direct the same feeling at Todd beside him.

“Do you intend to betray us, Jason Asano?” Elizabeth asked directly.

“No,” Jason said. The frustration at his need to make a deal edged past his best attempts to mask his emotions.

“I cannot speak for the others,” Elizabeth said, “but I will participate in this endeavour.”

## Chapter 447

### Too Much Over Pride

The lone female vampire was seemingly the one most feared by the other vampires. After she agreed to join Jason in his conquest of the transformation zone, the four males looked at her and went off by themselves to discuss. From their expressions, the discussion was forceful and unfriendly. In the end, two chose to throw in with Jason while the last two refused. One of the refusers was Wassily.

“What is it you think you can accomplish?” Jason asked them. “You have no power, here. You’re at the mercy of forces larger than yourself.”

“You think that you’re a power greater than me?” Wassily asked.

“No,” Jason said. “But I’ve taken control of some of the power here. Enough that the ground you’re standing on belongs to me.”

“Then come over here and show me your power, little boy. Or are you afraid to step into the dark?”

Jason shook his head.

“I’ve risked too much over pride too many times,” he said sadly. “It always ends up being others who pay the price. I’m done risking the fate of the world for my own short-sighted goals. So, if I have to work with the man who killed my brother I’ll do it. If the price of saving everyone is letting you people walk away, I’ll do that too. I came here to shut down your operation and that’s done. I can live with waiting to kill you down the line.”

“This is not the place to make a stand, Wassily,” Elizabeth said. “There is too much going on here that we don’t understand. We’ve waited centuries to rule this world. You can wait a few days until this boy is no longer protected by the power he wields here.”

“Do you truly believe the world is in danger? The entire world. That’s as nonsensical as it being a sphere.”

“Wait,” Jason said. “You’re a flat-Earther? Oh, crap; you’re all super-old.”

“What do you mean, the world is a sphere?” the other refuser asked.

“Of course it’s not a sphere,” Wassily said. “If it was a sphere, people would fall off the bottom. That anyone believes that nonsense is a reflection of what happens when peasants run around without a firm hand at the tiller.”

“As much as I want to dive into this,” Jason said, “and I really, really do, there are more important things at hand. Shade, if you would?”

Darkness streamed from Jason's shadow, moved across the border into the night zone and transformed into three carriages, each tethered to black horses with glowing white manes and hooves.

"Those will protect you from the sun as we return to the heart of my domain," Jason said. "Anyone who remains behind will most likely die, and die soon."

\*\*\*

The three vampires who chose to join were Elizabeth, Klaus and Georges. Jason had provided a carriage for each, both to avoid further conflict and to isolate them within the group. The carriages and the mystical horse-forms that drew them were shadow-stuff, made from Shade's bodies. They moved across the ground at blistering speed, largely ignoring the terrain. They were blacked out entirely to shield their occupants from the sun and Jason had timed their approach so that they returned to his core domain early in the night.

The celestines once again emerged at Jason's arrival but Jason had Shade usher them back inside before letting any of his new allies out. The necromancer looked up at the eye floating over the pagoda.

"You know that looks just like—"

"I know what it looks like," Jason said.

Jason left his guests in the mezzanine lounge and ascended to the top floor. He took his usual place on the balcony and triggered the transfiguration of his new territories: the messenger territory and those surrendered by the necromancer.

- 
- 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: 88.9%
  - Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?
- 

"No."

It had to be a hundred percent. It was the only reason he would tolerate the people downstairs when he wanted nothing more than to kill them all.

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "Mr North has requested to come up and speak to you."

"Fine."

Jason could sense everything inside his spirit domain, including Mr North standing on the elevating platform, which he mentally ordered to ascend. While he waited, he closed

his eyes. His vision extended out and he surveyed one of his new territories, which was a land under a perpetual eclipse.

The macabre ziggurats and gothic towers of the necromancer's former territory were now alien and crystalline, glowing with eerie internal light. The dead earth was now covered in low plants that glowed with luminescent foliage. It was strange but beautiful.

Jason had chosen to look at that spot because he could sense the two vampires that had refused to join. He had been wrong in thinking the vampires would die, but could tell from their auras that they were changed. Like the gold-ranker, Tran, the vampires had been claimed by unstable energy and transformed into anomalies. One was a hulking grotesque of unliving flesh, twice the size of a man and grossly misshapen. This was Wassily, although none of his former personality was evident on his new face.

Wassily's face made plain the nature that the beauty of a vampire hid: power and hunger; the need to devour. The other vampire was similarly reflective of this, but in a very different way. The other vampire had turned into a cluster of blood ticks, each the size of a dining table. Only from their shared aura could Jason tell that they were a unified creature and the new form of the vampire.

The auras of the former vampires were altered but recognisable. To Jason's senses, their auras were more vampiric than vampires. These were vampires with their veneers removed; their humanity stripped away to leave only the monstrous aspect.

Jason was not taken aback by the distillation of their vampiric thirst. For all its clarity, it paled in comparison to the familiar living inside Jason. Compared to the apocalyptic hunger of a sanguine horror, even the most clarified vampiric thirst was laughable.

Sensing the approach of Shade and Mr North, Jason opened his eyes, his perception returning to the pagoda. He turned from the balustrade to face the approaching pair and Mr North stopped, giving Jason an assessing look.

"You know that I was already gold rank when I came to this world, Mr Asano. I've seen great adventurers in the other world."

"So?" Jason asked.

"The essence users of this world are garbage, as you know. The Americans and the Chinese are adequate, but under the guidance of Dawn and Miss Hurin, you've surpassed them in your time here. Once you return to my homeworld, you'll be able to go around without embarrassing yourself, but don't expect the kind of advantages you have here. Try taking on someone above your rank and you'll meet the Reaper without knowing what happened."

"I know," Jason said. "I thought it would be amazing to be a famous hero, but I was naïve. Again. It's not clean. The situations are ugly and so are the solutions. People see things how they want to, even when the truth is both completely different and blindingly obvious."

Mr North smiled.

"Yes, they do."

"I'm looking forward to being just some guy again," Jason said.

"I think, perhaps, you're still a little naïve, Mr Asano. I don't think you're as past playing hero as you like to tell yourself, even if you should be."

"What did you come here for, Mr North?"

"I just told you that you shouldn't expect to be exceptional, but there is one area in which you are."

"Aura strength, I know."

"No. Well, yes, but that's not the point I'm making. The strength speaks to what you've endured, but not your capability. I'm talking about the remarkable deftness with which you use such a powerful weapon."

"Aura manipulation."

"Yes. Who taught you?"

"Farrah. I picked up some more from others along the way. Dawn, my friend Craig."

"The vampire?"

"Yes."

"Very smart. Not many in the other world get a chance to learn from them as vampires aren't exactly tolerated. And a diamond ranker, and not just any. Your aura manipulation is truly something to be proud of, Mr Asano. Gold-rank vampires are nothing to sneeze at. Their instinctive knack for certain aspects of aura use has confounded many an essence user. Lying to their faces, at a rank below them, no less? The picture you painted them with your aura was true artistry."

"Is that why you came up here? To compliment me for being a good liar?"

"I'm advising you to lean into that strength, in the other world. Your peers will be highly capable, and you're a decent all-rounder, but every all-rounder needs something to set them apart. If you want to be truly great, leverage that advantage. Bring it into everything you do."

"Auras have their uses, but they aren't applicable in every situation."

"Not with that attitude. As it stands, you're wasting that strength."

"So, you didn't come here to compliment me. You came to tell me I suck."

“I came to remind you to be vigilant. Don’t let the vampires know your true intentions.”

Jason took a step forward.

“What do you know of my true intentions?” he asked, his voice turning icy.

“Mr Asano, I knew how this was going to end from the moment I was trapped in this place.”

“Do I have to kill you, Mr North?”

“No, Mr Asano. You just want to.”

They looked at each other in silence for a long time.

“Shade, take Mr North back downstairs.”

Shade led North away again and Jason turned back to the railing, closing his eyes. Once again, his vision moved to the dark realm under the eclipse and the two former vampires. They were no moving together and seemed to be roaming the empty territory, looking for a means to assuage their hunger. They were moving roughly in the direction of the heart of his domain, although they would take a vast amount of time to reach it at their current pace.

“What do you think, Shade?” Jason asked.

“I cannot see what you see, Mr Asano, but I assume you are checking on the vampires who neglected to join us.”

“They aren’t vampires anymore.”

“I recall you saying something about taking risks over pride.”

“This isn’t the same fight,” Jason said. “I don’t think they have any intelligence left. Even if I can’t win, I’m confident I can escape.”

“Can you win?” Shade asked.

“I think so.”

“Then we should go.”

“Yeah? Not the answer I was expecting.”

“Caution is not about avoiding battles, Mr Asano. It’s about choosing them.”

“Alright, then. Let’s go kill a Polish ex-vampire.”

Jason opened a portal arch and stepped through.

\*\*\*

There were eight of the giant blood ticks and they moved quickly. Their flesh was soft but they had praying mantis-like arm blades of incredibly hard chitin. If not for the swarm of Shade bodies that spread out, their numbers and skittering speed would have overwhelmed Jason in short order. One of Shade’s bodies was set off towards the other



former vampire, racing along the ground in the form of a horse at speeds that would shame a motorcycle.

Jason kept his other familiars unmanifested for the moment as he shadow-jumped to reposition, dodge and strike. He had two of Gordon's orbs around him to turn into shields and intercept attacks. They were hammered by arm blades and were not enough to intercept every attack but they shielded Jason from the worst hits.

Jason's life drain and health regeneration abilities were in full swing as he made attacks and cast spells to lay his afflictions on everything. The gold-rank ticks were weaker individually than a gold-rank monster but as a cluster, they posed a significant threat to Jason. This was demonstrated when a blade arm shattered one of his orb shields and an immediate follow-up severed his arm, just below the shoulder.

Straps of bloody leather shot out from Jason's robe, grabbed the loose arm and pulled it back into place.

- 
- Familiar [Sanguine Horror] has consumed significant biomass to reattach your arm.
  - Familiar can reconstitute biomass over time when subsumed into the summoner or by making life drain attacks.
- 

The early parts of the fight were even hairier than Jason had anticipated, but the ticks grew weaker with every passing moment. His rigor mortis affliction slowed down both the physical and the healing speed of the monsters, even as their bodies were increasingly ravaged. Their gold rank bodies seemed almost impervious to Jason's afflictions in the beginning, but their exponential growth was inexorable.

Meanwhile, Jason was trying something new. In addition to his usual evasion tactics, he was more actively trying to use his aura to feint. It was something new and inexpertly applied, but several times it helped him dodge an attack that otherwise would have hit, or land an attack that would have missed.

The first tick finally fell, then a second and a third. The transcendent light of his execute spell savaged them but didn't eradicate the corpses entirely, the way it did with most enemies. Even though transcendent damage ignored rank and defences, Jason's silver-rank power could only fuel it so much. Once more, he was astounded at what felt like the indestructibility of even weak gold-rank enemies. It was only when the final tick fell that the former vampire truly died. Like the spider anomaly boss Jason had fought, only by killing all of it was it truly dead.

- 
- You have defeated [Reality-Dysphoric Anomaly].

---

Jason didn't waste time, immediately using blood harvest to drain the remnant life force from the dead ticks, ramping up his speed and recovery power. He then shadow-jumped to the Shade he sent after the other vampiric anomaly, kilometres away.

The ogrish monster proved the easier fight because it was alone and not fast for a gold-rank, while Jason was now boosted to near gold-rank levels of speed. His blood powers were effective against it and Jason pulled out his other familiars, giving him the edge in numbers.

Even so, there was no such thing as an easy fight against a gold-rank anything. Jason took a couple of square hits that send him flying like a cricket ball, his muscle mashed and his bones broken. He had to recall Colin to consume more of his biomass before the hulking former vampire capitalised and devoured Jason altogether. When the brute was finally on the verge of death, Jason called Colin back out to replenish itself by gorging on the vampire.

---

➤ You have defeated [Reality-Dysphoric Anomaly].

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## Chapter 448

### Trust All the Way

Jason was painted red, both from his own blood and that of his enemies. He ignored it for the moment as he pulled a clear crystal orb from his inventory.

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Item: [Genesis Reclamation Core] (transcendent rank, legendary)

*A magical vessel capable of reclaiming the energy of unseated reality cores (consumable, magic core).*

- **Effect:** Can drain the energy from unseated reality cores, as well as individuals and objects that have consumed that energy. When completely charged, this item will transmute into a [Regenes Core].

---

Touching it to what was left of the vampire after transcendent damage and a very hungry Colin got to it, rainbow energy started to spill inside. Once it stopped, Jason tried to loot the creature, which dissolved into rainbow smoke.

- 
- **These remains have been drained of all magical energy. They cannot be looted.**

---

Only after moving back to the dead ticks was he able to drain more energy and completely fill the orb.

---

Item: [Regenes Core] (transcendent rank, legendary)

*Can serve as the basis of a reality construct (crafting material, magic core).*

- **Effect:** Can be used as a basis for creating constructs that blend physical and astral components, such as dimensional vessels.

---

Jason had around twenty of the empty reclamation cores. He had intended to farm vampires to charge them, in the hopes that they would help him stabilise the node space or repair the effects of transformation zones. Instead, they would help him build the bridge between worlds, using the existing link as a basis once he had repaired it.

He understood the means to do so instinctively, courtesy of the bridge device that had been Dawn's parting gift. Like the Builder's magic door and the eye of doom, or even his essences, it was an item that he had absorbed into his soul.

The regenes cores were better than nothing but he was a little disappointed. The number of orbs he would need to fill was not worth the time it would take to hunt a

sufficient number of vampires. He could hunt down reality core stockpiles to accelerate the process, but the latest transformation zone had finally taught Jason the lesson he had failed to learn over and over. It was time to stop being distracted and dedicate himself only to repairing the link between worlds.

“Not everything works out quite right, I guess,” he told himself. He had never run around draining vampires to enhance his strength the way that Dawn had wanted him to, either. Events simply overtook him. Even so, the number and difficulty of the fights in the transformation zones had been effective in once more pushing his abilities forward.

Putting the orb away, Jason portalled back to the pagoda.

\*\*\*

The vampires in Jason’s mezzanine lounge, Elizabeth, Klaus and Georges, had been waiting while Jason was upstairs, or so they thought. Their aura senses were unable to penetrate the walls, floors and ceilings of the pagoda, which left them uneasy and on edge.

It also meant that they were unaware that Jason had left, come back and was showering off the blood of their former vampiric rivals upstairs. Shade had led the necromancer and Mr North to individual suites in the mid-levels, leaving the vampires alone.

“I don’t like this,” Georges said. “It feels like we’re handing all the power to this infant magician.”

“We’re not handing him the power,” Elizabeth said. “If he didn’t have the power already, he’d be a drained-out husk right now.”

“He won’t go out during the day because we’re no use to him, in that case,” Klaus said. “With no sunlight for him to hide in, we take him together. Whatever extra power this place gives him, it can only be so much. Otherwise, why would he need us?”

“We also need him,” Elizabeth said. “Not only does he have power over this place but also knowledge of its rules. If nothing else, this strange realm may well collapse without him.”

“You don’t believe this threat to the entire world nonsense,” Klaus said.

“Look at the world we’ve returned to,” Elizabeth said. “Even those without magic have power that was unimaginable in our time. They can fire a weapon from a boat at sea that can destroy a castle. Iron birds carrying people across continents. Talking to someone on the far side of the world as if they were standing next to you. Then there is the magic. It’s everywhere, now, and even if we do not wish to admit it, some of these new magicians are stronger than us.”

“We have the numbers,” Klaus said.

“No we don’t,” Elizabeth said. “In the old days, only the strongest mattered. That is no longer the case, which is why we worked with the necromancer to create so many ghouls.”

She got to her feet.

“I’m going to smooth things over with Asano,” she said.

“Smooth things out?” Klaus asked.

“Are you fool enough to believe he isn’t listening to every word we say?” Elizabeth asked. “Plots and schemes are for behind closed doors, and this place has none. Not to him.”

\*\*\*

Jason was meditating, sitting cross-legged and floating at standing height above the top floor balcony.

- 
- Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) has reached Silver 3 (100%).
  - Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) has advanced to Silver 4 (00%).
- 

Although he hadn’t been draining vampires, Jason’s abilities had continued to advance. The challenges of the transformation space had advanced his abilities, although there was a definitive wall. After the early growth, things had slowed at silver three. Once they reached silver four, though, slow became all but a stop. On achieving that level, the advancement of each power came to a slamming halt, like a baby thrown at a wall.

---

### Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: silver
- Progression to gold rank: 30%

### Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Silver 3].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Silver 3].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Silver 3].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Silver 3].

### Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

- [Party Interface].
- [Defiant].
- [Spirit Domain].
- [Tactical Map].
- [Nirvanic Transfiguration].

- [Dark Rider].

### Essences (4/4)

#### Dark [Speed] (5/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Silver 4] 02%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Silver 4] 01%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Silver 3] 87%.
- [Hand of the Reaper] (special ability): [Silver 3] 39%.
- [Shadow of the Reaper] (familiar): [Silver 3] 88%.

#### Blood [Power] (5/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Silver 3] 41%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Silver 3] 67%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Silver 3] 11%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Silver 3] 18%.
- [Haemorrhage] (spell): [Silver 3] 13%.

#### Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Silver 3] 59%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Silver 3] 08%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Silver 3] 03%.
- [Hegemony] (aura): [Silver 4] 00%.
- [Castigate] (spell): [Silver 3] 04%.

#### Doom [Spirit] (5/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Silver 3] 89%.
- [Punition] (spell): [Silver 3] 54%.
- [Blade of Doom] (spell): [Silver 3] 79%.
- [Verdict] (spell): [Silver 3] 12%.
- [Avatar of Doom] (familiar): [Silver 3] 14%.

---

Jason had always been warned about the wall he would hit at silver rank. The transformation zone had pushed him hard and gotten him to the current stage, but it looked like he had reached his limit. There would be little more meaningful advancement without years of grinding, which was a task for the other world.

He opened his eyes, again regretting leaving Farrah behind. He had done so for stealth concerns, which was hardly a factor at the moment. He had told himself over and over that it was the right decision with the available information, but had a feeling she wouldn't see it that way.

\*\*\*

Farrah looked from the deck of the cloud boat, her eyes panning over the dome in the distance, as they had a hundred times every day since it appeared.

"I am going to kick that idiot square in the..."

\*\*\*

Elizabeth moved in her ball gown like she was floating. With her pale skin, red lips, delicate features and midnight hair, she was every bit the vampire. Her face might have lacked the polished perfection of an essence user but her slight smile and smouldering eyes held the seductive promise of sultry intelligence. She was led out to the balcony by Shade to where Jason was sitting, floating in the air. He uncrossed his legs and set his feet on the floor.

“I realise that the other vampires are more rivals than companions,” he said, “but I would like for you to get them settled. You clearly have primacy amongst them.”

“Easier said than done,” Elizabeth said. “I am part of what puts them ill at ease. When there were four others, they had the confidence to eliminate me if united. With only two, certainty becomes insecurity.”

“Just do your best. I intend to continue resting for the day and move when the night comes again, out of deference to your requirements.”

“Thank you,” she said. “There is something I would like to discuss with you in private, which is why I’ve come to see you.”

“Go on.”

“I think you intend to kill us all.”

“I figured that out,” Jason said. “The big clue was when you asked me if I was going to kill you all. You think I was lying when I said no.”

“Yes, but I couldn’t sense that you were. Every instinct told me that you were telling the truth. That scares me.”

“You’re afraid of little old me?”

“You are an aspect of a larger concern. This new world has too many secrets and too much power. Now that the core ghoul expansion and blood enhancement projects have been put paid to, my expectations for vampiric victory have been diminished. Not to mention, I have no idea how many more like you are running around.”

“There’s not many,” Jason said. “It’s basically just me and Tom Selleck. You’re looking to switch sides.”

“I’m strong and have valuable information. I also know I won’t be the first to join the human cause. The old factions have fractured and new ones are being formed. I believe there is a place for me in this new world, so long as I let go of ideas about the old one.”

“That’s a lot of humility for one of the old vampires.”

“I grew up as a woman in a time and place where that meant being utterly without power. I know how to persevere.”

“So, you want me to spare you. You’re confident that I can kill you.”

“I’m a practitioner of vampiric blood magic. It’s not the same as the magic you use, but there are enough similarities that I’ve been able to learn things since awakening. I have some sense of the forces at work and how small we are before them. I believe that they could destroy this world, should they choose to. If you can control even the smallest measure of that power, that is not wise to stand against.”

“You put me in an awkward position, Miss Elizabeth. If I accept your offer, I’m as good as admitting to having plans to kill you. If I reject it, you’ll assume I intend to kill you and be an unreliable ally.”

“The assumption is made, either way, Jason Asano. You may as well take the path that benefits you.”

“It’s that simple? If you get out of here, you promise to join team human?”

“I can offer you some assurance. I have a form of blood magic. It allows me to maintain a blood crystal that will attract my soul and create a new body for it should this one be destroyed. There’s a price, of course, but when death is the alternative, what would you not surrender?”

“I can think of a few things.”

“My preference is to stow the crystal in a safe location, but we are short on those right now.”

“So, you want me to let you stash it somewhere.”

She took a red, finger-sized crystal from her dress; Jason wasn’t sure where exactly, not seeing any pockets. She held it out for him to take.

“Since my only recourse is to trust you,” she said, “I may as well trust all the way and try to reap the benefits. I hope you don’t think the other vampires joined you humans from a moral imperative.”

“I’ve been a fool more than once, but not that much of a fool. Joining the human side is not the same as joining me, though,” Jason said. “I am not a part of the human factions. I’m not human at all.”

“I’d wondered,” she said. “Your aura isn’t right for a human. I thought it was something to do with your magic, but my instincts were right. Even so, you came here on behalf of the humans.”

“A mistake I will not repeat.”

Jason took the crystal, still proffered in her hand.

---

Item: [Blood Rebirth Crystal] (gold rank, conjured)



*The rebirth stone of a vampire, crafted with blood magic (conjured, tool).*

- Effect: Allows a vampire to revive from bodily destruction at greatly diminished power.

---

“This is quite the trusting gesture,” Jason said.

“I don’t see as I have an alternative.”

“Very well. Do you have a last name, Elizabeth?”

“I did, long ago. I discarded the name and the memories that went with it, long before you were born.”

“Then I will leave it be.”

“Thank you. If I may ask, before I return to the lower floor, do you know what became of the others who chose not to join us?”

“They survived the transfiguration of my domain, but they were changed by it. Turned into mindless creatures of hunger.”

“They are still out there, then?”

“No,” Jason said as he leaked a little of Colin’s aura from within him. “There are things hungrier than vampires, Elizabeth.”

The equanimity on her face was broken for the first time as her eyes slightly widened.

“I have to wonder, Jason Asano, if there isn’t something inside you more terrible than all of us.”

“I wonder that myself, sometimes. It’s time for you to...”

He trailed off as he felt something shake his domain, although the vampire sensed nothing.

- 
- A nascent spirit domain has expanded into your spirit domain. This has turned your border territory into a contested zone.
  - Claiming a contested territory requires the defeat of the other domain holder. Defeat can take to form of surrender or death. Extended absence from the border territory will constitute a surrender.

---

“Asano?”

He strode past her. In the direction of the elevating platform.

“Come with me,” he ordered. “It seems that Mr Gerling has chosen our timeline for us.”

## Chapter 449

### Time to Choose

“This is different,” Gerling said. “I can feel it.”

Gerling and his team were in a city of graceful, narrow spires and islands floating in the air on beds of cloud. Bridges connected the floating islands to each other, while columns of light connected them to the ground, with elevating platforms that rose up and disappeared into the clouds.

The streets were bright and clean, with white marble buildings and roads of dark crystal flagstones. Trees lined the streets, their branches almost sagging with the weight of peaches and plums.

“It’s like heaven,” said Bennett, Gerling’s chief offside.

“Right down to the absence of anomalies,” Barbou said. “Gerling, can you sense any?”

“This isn’t my domain, so my senses don’t blanket the place,” Gerling said. “This belongs to someone else, until we find them and take it from them. I truly hope it’s Asano.”

They started searching the city but found it to be empty, with no anomalies or domain holder to confront.

“He has to be here somewhere,” Gerling said. “If he doesn’t contest this territory, it’ll become mine by default.”

“Oh, I’ve made worse mistakes than defaulting on real estate,” Jason said, his voice coming around a corner. They hurried around to find Jason sitting at what looked to be an outdoor café with a large tree in the middle of the dining area. Its high branches and lush foliage offered shady refuge from the bright, clear sky. Jason was wearing a casual suit, as if enjoying a pleasant day on the Riviera.

Gerling and his subordinates gathered up in front of the café, looking at Jason.

“It’s not open,” Jason said regretfully. “I’d love an iced tea.”

“It’s time for you to surrender, Asano,” Gerling said. “Give up your domain and I’ll let you live. You can’t fight me, let alone the rest of us.”

“You Americans have the best training of essence users in the world,” Jason said. “The Chinese are about on par with you, but you leave everyone else in the dust, even with the new training programs Farrah organised. It’s been a few years and they’re catching up, but they’re not there yet.”

“Don’t bother stalling, Asano. Now that I can invade your domain, there’s nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide.”

“Would you mind not interrupting? I’m trying to monologue here. At least wait until I’ve explained my evil plan, strewth. Did you not get the white American protagonist handbook?”

Gerling chose not to put up with any more of Jason’s rambling and took a step towards him. Immediately, Jason’s aura washed over Gerling and his team in a wave. Gerling fended it off with his own aura but the others looked like they were having seizures standing up.

Gerling pushed out with his aura, extending it to the limit. Preventing his aura from being suppressed by Jason was not difficult due to the rank disparity, even with Jason’s potency. His men couldn’t use their auras at all, however, and shielding them with his own was much harder.

“As I was saying,” Jason said, as if their auras weren’t locking horns like raging bulls. “You Americans are trained quite well. The one area you fall short is aura control. You’re not terrible, certainly, and in most cases you’re at a sufficient competence level. But then someone like me comes along and suddenly all your little friends become liabilities. Unless you’re willing to give them up to my soul attacks, which you really shouldn’t. You can trust me on that.”

“Shut up,” Gerling snarled. With a grimace he managed to surge his aura and free his people from Jason’s aura suppression, cutting off the soul attacks. They all collapsed to the ground except for Adrien Barbou, who had not been attacked. He was standing over to the side, trying to look insignificant.

“G’day, Adrien,” Jason said, unperturbed by his attack being arrested. “Can I call you Adrien? We’ve only spoken over the phone before, so this is our first time meeting in person. A bloke might think you were dodging him.”

Gerling rushed at Jason, plunging into a spider web that he hadn’t realised was there and getting stuck in it. He pulled himself free in a series of jerking movements, his gold-rank strength easily up to the task.

“We really are just here to talk,” Mr North said, emerging from the café behind Jason. Barbou’s faced showed a mix of relief, confusion and fear.

“Hello Adrien,” Mr North said.

“You,” Gerling said.

“You know who I am,” Mr North said, sitting at the table with Jason. “That saves an introduction.”

“Why are you with him?” Gerling asked, jerking his head at Jason.

“I’m saving the world,” Mr North said. “I’ve been at it far longer than Mr Asano has. He’s something of a Johnny-come-lately.”

“Some of us aren’t centuries old,” Jason said.

“Really, Mr Asano? Age discrimination?”

“SHUT UP!” Gerling roared.

“Alright,” Jason said, dropping his half-smirk and smug body language. “Gerling, it’s time for you and I to come to terms.”

“Do please sit,” Mr North added. “We can talk now and you’ll still have the option to punch us later.”

At his side, Gerling’s hand squeezed into a fist as Jason and Mr North waited for his response, appearing completely unperturbed. Gerling loosened his fist with an unhappy grimace and took a seat.

“Cards on the table time,” Jason said. “Gerling, you’ve been expanding a domain, yes? You can feel the power growing inside you. That once it’s complete, you’ll truly be able to imprint yourself on this place.”

Gerling nodded but said nothing, letting Jason continue.

“I’ve been where you are, but there’s a problem, in that I have something you don’t. You know that I’ve been telling people that I’m saving the world, while being rather vague as to how.”

“I do.”

“There was an artefact. A powerful tool created by the being who... well, ‘who’ isn’t relevant right now. Suffice to say, this being is powerful beyond imagining.”

“You’re talking about a god.”

“Close enough, for purposes of this conversation,” Jason said.

“I brought this artefact to this world when I arrived in it,” Mr North said. “This was before the Network ever existed. It’s founding was part of a larger plan; a regulatory measure as the world’s magic increased. The purpose was to stabilise this world if it gained too much magic and started to unravel. As it quite demonstrably has.”

“I’ve heard about the thing you’re talking about,” Gerling said, looking at Jason. “You absorbed it.”

“Adrien,” Mr North said with disappointed admonishment, before turning back to Gerling.

“The point,” North continued, “is that the artefact in question allows Jason to edit reality, within very specific and limited parameters. He’s been using it to undo certain

changes made to this world long ago. Changes that have caused the rise in magic that, if not stopped, will destroy the world.”

“You’re trying to take magic away?” Gerling asked.

“No,” Jason said. “That toothpaste is already out of the tube. But the Earth is at its limit, now and can’t take any more increases in magic. Think of it like filling a water balloon at a tap. I’m trying to turn the tap off before the balloon bursts.”

“And an event like this,” Gerling said, gesturing around them, “is a sharp pencil, poking at the balloon.”

“The last abnormal transformation space did damage,” Jason said. “I didn’t do a perfect job of stopping it. This time, I have to, or the balloon pops. That means completely absorbing all of it into a single domain. That’s the only way to make it stable enough when we merge this space back into the world.”

“Then surrender your domain to me,” Gerling said. “I’ll unify it.”

“It’s not that simple,” Mr North said. “There’s a reason we brought up the artefact. Jason’s unique abilities give him a measure of control over this space. His domain was baked into the origins of this one, which we believe to be the reason that others can make more of them.”

“So?” Gerling asked. “It’s already in place, now. Ceding it to me shouldn’t matter.”

“It isn’t just about forming a domain,” Jason said. “It’s about reintegrating that domain. The power the door grants me is critical to making that process go smoothly. It’s probably required to initiate the process at all.”

“Probably?” Gerling asked. “How many of your confident assertions are guesswork?”

“More than we’d like,” Jason admitted. “That’s not a reason to take risks we don’t have to.”

“The risk is putting you in charge of everything,” Gerling said. “Power is what matters in expanding a domain and you don’t have the strength to make this work. I do.”

“Do you?” Jason asked. “How many powers have you unlocked? Five? Six?”

“Three,” Adrien chimed in, earning him a glare from Gerling.

“Mine were unsealed from the beginning,” Jason said. “All of them.”

“That’s crap. The last time, your powers were sealed as well.”

“This is not the same as the last time, Gerling,” Jason said. “If you choose to fight, you’ll find out for yourself. Mr North here will tie you up in webs while I kill and feed on your little minions, taking from their dead bodies the strength I need to kill you too. Which I will.”

“Then why aren’t we fighting already? You gave up the element of surprise.”

“You said it yourself: power is what matters in expanding a domain. We have Mr North, three ancient vampires, the necromancer of Makassar and an army of ghouls. We could use your strength.”

“That’s a real team of heroes you’ve got there. Why should I be part of it? Your vampires aren’t going to come out in the sun, and if I take you down, I’m the only hope that’s left. They’ll fall in line behind me.”

Jason closed his eyes and bowed his head, forcing down the first response that came to mind. Then he forced down the second and third.

“I told you once before, Gerling, that I was asked to put aside thoughts of revenge by someone whose wishes I am compelled to give weight. Let’s end thing here, you and I. We do this, together, and then we each go our own way. You fight the vampire war and save the world from the bloodsucker apocalypse. I leave the Earth to finish what I started here and save it from crumbling from under you. We bury our past and go our separate ways, as soon as we’re out of here.”

“And this little friendship circle starts with my handing over everything that me and my guys have fought for in this place? Everything we’ve earned.”

“No, Gerling. Starting with me putting aside for good the fact that you killed my brother, my lover and my friend.”

“I don’t want your forgiveness.”

Jason ran a frustrated hand over his face.

“Are you that obsessed with power?” he asked.

“Are you that insistent on being the only one that’s special?” Gerling shot back.

Jason stood up and started pacing, scratching absently at his head. Gerling stood up as well.

“Then I guess it’s winner takes all,” Gerling said. “We could have settled this without you two jabbering on.”

Something appeared in front of Gerling’s face.

“What the hell?”

“Just accept it, Gerling,” Jason said. “Let me show you something.”

---

➤ [\[Jason Asano\] has invited you to form a party. Accept Y/N?](#)

---

“What is this?” Gerling asked.

“It’s how I see the world,” Jason said. “I can’t hurt you with it. I know you feel that.”

Gerling frowned, conflicted. He didn't trust Jason but his instincts really did tell him it was safe. What decided it, though, was the chance to pry open some of Asano's secrets.

Jason set out several items on the table. A spirit coin, a healing potion and a pair of minor magical gloves he had looted from an anomaly. He talked Gerling through looking at his own character screen and ability descriptions.

"This is how I know the things I know, Gerling. It's not just instinct."

Jason held out his hand for Gerling to shake.

- 
- Jason Asano.
  - Essence user (outworlder, silver rank).
  - ??? (spirit domain hegemon).

---

"This is my fight, Gerling. You have no concept of the enemies I've made along the way."

"You've survived so far," Gerling said.

"No," Jason said. "I haven't."

Still holding Gerling's hand, Jason concentrated.

- 
- Jason Asano.
  - Essence user (outworlder, silver rank).
  - ??? (spirit domain hegemon).
  - Number of deaths: 4.

---

Jason let go.

- 
- [Jason Asano] has disbanded the party.
  - You no longer have access to [Party Interface].

---

Gerling felt an odd sense of loss as the power to see his abilities laid out in front of him was taken away.

"You have your own fight, Gerling. By the time the vampire war is over, you're going to be a hero to the world. Frankly, I'm glad I won't be here to see it."

"Yet, you're working with vampires now."

"There has to be a world to fight over," Jason said. "Even they understand that."

"And what happens to our little club once we're done and you have control?" Gerling asked.

"I've already made deals," Jason said. "I'm not happy about them, but I can live with them."

"You expect us to believe you'll just let us walk away?"

"It varies," Jason said. "The necromancer is getting thrown in a hole where he'll be stuck doing *closely monitored* medical research for the Network. The closest thing the vampires have to a leader will be switching sides."

"You're sure about that?"

"After the loss of the astral space facilities, she's a lot less confident in the her side's chances in the war. She won't be the first to defect. The smart ones know that the faster they come across, the better they'll be once everything is said and done."

Gerling took his own turn to pace as he mulled things over. His people were still lying around, feeling like they'd been through a wringer.

"If I throw in," Gerling said. "If I give up my domain, I want something in return."

"What?" Jason asked.

"Teach me how to use my aura like you. Negate suppression collars. Attack people. How is your aura so strong?"

"Ah," Mr North said. "I don't think that's a path you want to go down, Mr Gerling. Mr Asano's power in that regard is a result of trauma the likes of which I cannot explain. Literally, I cannot. I don't understand what a person would have to go through to reach that point and it would be more likely to destroy you. I've seen that kind of damage leave powerful essence users as broken wrecks. I have no doubt that Mr Asano himself was taken to the brink and took no small amount of time to recover."

"But he did recover," Gerling said. "And now he has an incredible power."

"I had a lot of help," Jason said. "Specialist care, for months."

"I can take it."

"I don't even know how to do that to a person," Mr North said. "We're talking about scouring your very soul."

"I do," Jason said. "If you want to know what it takes, Gerling, lower your aura defences and I'll give you a taste."

"You think I'll just open myself up like that?"

"I told you, Mr Gerling," Mr North said. "Trauma."

"Which you could easily be making up."

"Gerling, how many scars do you have?"

"None, obviously. Essence users can't get..."



Gerling was looking straight at Jason face, trailing off as he realised that the small scars on it shouldn't have been possible.

"How?" he asked.

"Some marks run deeper than others," Jason said. "I'm going to lower my aura defences and you can see for yourself. Take a look at my soul, Gerling."

Jason's aura, which suffused the area as part of his domain, was suddenly diminished. None of it was emitted from Jason himself at all. Gerling, wary of a trap, slowly extended his own out to examine Jason.

Gerling was no stranger to examining the souls of others. As a bully with power, he had often forcefully looked over the souls of the people around him. None of them were anything like Asano's.

Jason's soul was scarred and pitted, like the wall of a fortress that had endured countless sieges and never broken. He could feel powerful forces within. Defiance, resolution. Power. A tyrannical force that would not be swayed by greater powers. There was also something else that made Gerling uneasy. It was faint, just an echo, not belonging to Jason but something that had touched him and left a profound mark. Something Gerling's instincts wanted to call divine but he refused to do so.

Everything about Jason's soul hinted at a story Gerling could not see. Stories of endurance and suffering. Of enemies with impossible power, not just defied but overcome. Jason's soul told stories of victory, and the price he paid for it, time and again.

Gerling pulled his senses back.

"That's my soul, Gerling," Jason said softly.

"You said trauma," Gerling said. "If a few cuts on your face is all it takes to make your break open suppression collars, I'll take that hit."

Jason frowned and shrugged off his light jacket. He unbuttoned his shirt and opened it up, showing the myriad cuts where fragments of star seed had been pushed out of his body. A wide, bright scar ran from his right hip to wind around the left side of his torso. That was from his first fight with a silver-rank monster, when he was only iron-rank. His desperate scramble to distract it as villagers evacuated has almost cost him his life.

"If you want scars, Gerling, I can give them to you. I can rake your soul, if that's what you want, but now isn't the time for that. Now, it's time to choose. Are you going to stand with us or stand against us?"

## Chapter 450

### Four-Score Men

"Well," Jason said. "This is awkward."

Every person gathered in the mezzanine lounge of the pagoda had either tried to or succeeded in killing or kidnapping at least one other person present.

"Perhaps I should take the lead," Mr North suggested. "While I have tried to arrange several deaths amongst the group, I never tried to kill anyone here personally."

"Whatever works," Jason said. "Just make sure no one tries it again while I'm transfiguring the new territories."

Gerling's face creased with suppressed anger. Although he had ultimately agreed to participate, he was still not entirely at peace with his decision. He held his tongue, however, as Jason got on the elevating platform and ascended through the building.

"Boss," Bennett said. "Are we seriously going along with that guy after all the time you've been setting up to hunt him?"

"If we don't bend to circumstance, Bennett, then we break," Gerling said. "We are dealing with forces here larger than all of us. Don't speak on that again."

"Boss?"

"If Asano isn't listening to us, his shadow familiars are," Gerling said. "Watch your words with care."

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Jason completed the transfiguration of the territories surrendered by Gerling.

- 
- 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: 97.4%
  - Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?
- 

"That was worth bugger all," he complained after looking at the percentage. "Gerling, your domains were crap."

"I'm afraid he's unable to hear you from here, Mr Asano," Shade said. "If it would save you time, I can explain to him myself that he's a worthless aggregation of excrement whom the cosmos would be better for wiping off its shoe. Metaphorically speaking."

"I appreciate the sentiment," Jason said with a chuckle. "I'm afraid it wouldn't be productive at this stage," Jason said. "It seems that the severity reduction does not perfectly correlate related to how many domains are claimed. It's like a video game that immediately loads to ninety percent and then spends most of the loading time on the last ten."

"It seems likely that broad reductions in severity are relatively easy," Shade said, "but seamlessly integrating this anomalous realm into physical reality takes considerably more effort."

"Even so, we are close to the end."

Jason returned down the elevating platform to the others.

"It's done," he told them. "Now, what remains is to claim the final territories. It's almost complete, but completion grows harder the closer we get."

"I have something I've been wondering about," Todd the necromancer asked.

"What?" Jason asked.

"Three of us built domains separately," Todd said. "For each of us, our domains expanded in rings until they ran into one another. Yet, now you've taken over our territories, it's all just one set of expanding rings, right?"

"That's right," Jason said.

"Wouldn't that mean that the entire geography of this place is undergoing massive changes?" Todd asked. "Even the space it occupies in total would need to shift."

"That's exactly what's happening," Jason said. "I assume that, aside from Mr North, none of you has any grounding in astral magic theory. To my knowledge, most of it in your world was brought here by me, and I didn't share much."

"You mean *our* world," Elizabeth said.

"Yeah," Jason said. "A very bare-bones explanation of the astral is that the cosmos is like a bowl of dumpling soup. Physical realities, meaning universes like ours, with matter and energy and Knight Rider DVD box sets are the dumplings. The astral, which is raw magic that has no physical state, is the soup. You're all familiar with proto spaces and astral spaces. These are parts of a dumpling that the soup had made a bit soggy. They're part of the dumpling, but they work differently because of how they're affected by the soup."

Jason gestured broadly around them.

"This place is what happens when too much soup gets into the dumpling. It breaks apart. To drop the analogy, the magic of the astral realm renders the physical realm unstable and it breaks down. The rules of physical reality, as we understand them, go right

out the window. We're doing nothing less here than trying to rebuild the laws of physics by punching monsters and hoping for the best. That's about as likely to work as it sounds and I can't encapsulate how many things had to line up to give us a chance at this."

He glanced at Gerling.

"Adding more risk to the process is trying to fix Humpty Dumpty by pushing him off the wall again."

"Humpty Dumpty?" asked Elizabeth.

"Right," Jason said. "You've been asleep for centuries."

"It's an English children's rhyme," said Georges, the Frenchman amongst the vampires. "*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall; Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. Four-score men and four-score more, could not make him as he was before.* It means something is irrevocably broken."

"Exactly," Jason said. "Broadly speaking, what I've been doing over the last year is trying to prevent what is happening in this place from happening on a global scale. I don't think it would be exactly the same, but the entire planet becoming an abnormal transformation zone isn't all that far off from what would happen."

"How can you prevent that?" Elizabeth asked.

Jason turned to Mr North.

"Would you care to explain?" Jason asked.

"Long ago," Mr North said, "probably in your time, Miss Elizabeth, someone was sent to our world from another to set the events of the past few years into motion. I came to this world as his companion."

"Companion?" Gerling asked.

"His familiar," Mr North said. "I am not human."

"Hardly any of us are, at this point," Jason said. "Do vampires count?"

"No," Elizabeth said firmly. "Humans are herd animals."

Gerling's eyes hadn't left Mr North.

"So, you're responsible for putting the world in danger," Gerling accused.

"I participated, yes," Mr North admitted. "When I say set the current events in motion, I mean quite thoroughly. My formerly-bonded essence user is known to the Network now as the founder, as in, the man who established the network itself. Your entire organisation was created as a pressure valve. A safety measure to regulate the speed at which magic was injected into this world."

Mr North hung his head.

“As the centuries passed,” Mr North said, “I came to love this world. It can be ugly and cruel, and I have become both in my efforts to shield it, but it can also be wonderful. There is no magic dividing the weak from the strong. Humanity needs to advance as one to push itself forward.”

“That’s not really how it played out,” Jason said.

“No?” Mr North countered. “A diamond-ranker is a nuclear bomb that can walk around and do what it likes. No one individual in this world has the power they have in the other. Money and influence go far but no one here is immortal. There are no thousand-year kings. Until I came here and interfered with that order, this world had no taint of magic.”

Mr North’s animated body language suddenly stopped dead.

“That is why I turned against my essence user,” he said softly. “Betrayed him to Mr Gerling’s Network antecedents. This is the seed from which the advantage of the United States Network branches originates. I handed him over, both to stop him and to give myself the resources to begin my work.”

“What work is that?” Gerling asked. “Making superheroes?”

“In part, yes. I know what it looks like when essences are the source of power. I sought to democratise magic. Create a pathway to magic that I could give to everyone who wanted it, not just those who hoard and dole out essences as they please. It would give humanity more magic than I wanted them to have but that die had already been cast and I knew what was coming. What became the human augmentation project was centuries in the making and is yet to be perfected. I’ve taken shortcuts that I wish, on balance, I had not.”

“You used Builder cores to somehow stop their power from driving them insane,” Jason said.

“Modified clockwork cores, yes. My people discovered what is called a clockwork king, largely destroyed. It was here long before I ever arrived, for reasons unknown to me, but I exploited it. And Mr Asano, in turn, has exploited that to kill them with ease.”

“That’s how you killed those people in Venezuela,” Gerling said to Jason. “You know their weakness.”

“And he can exploit it, because of an artefact my essence user brought from the other world. It was the tool he brought to set off the changes in the world’s magic. It was also meant to be the most important tool to fix things if they went wrong. Which they did, but he was gone.”

“You couldn’t use it?”

"I could not, or I would have. The founder was originally from this world. He was drawn into the other and then sent back, just like Mr Asano. This bestowed the founder with certain traits and the artefact was protected such that only someone with those traits could use it. This was so that if anything happened to him, someone else could be sent to take up his work."

Mr North turned his gaze on Jason.

"Enter, Mr Asano. I have been preparing for his arrival since long before he was born, yet he surprised me. I was expecting a zealot when what arrived was a naïve fool with a hero complex. I had been anticipating an enemy, only to receive an ally."

Jason's lips pressed together unhappily but he held his tongue.

"Mr Asano's disposition changed much for me," Mr North said. "Unfortunately, I did not understand who and what he was until it was too late. I had already set events in motion that changed the world."

"You took down the grid," Jason said. "Initiated the monster waves and sent this world's magic careening out of control."

"The dangers this world faces now are only the beginning," Mr North said. "Unfortunately, I have set in motion the very events I have sought to avoid. Mr Asano will repair the world, but the only way to do so is to set in motion that which I have been trying to stop. My actions, in trying to set the timetable of events, could have, perhaps been avoided. It is too late, now, and all we can do is weather each storm after the next."

"What are you describing?" Elizabeth asked. "You are being very vague on the nature of this threat."

"Yes," Mr North said. "As I will continue to be."

"Those are the concerns of another day," Jason said, "but I hope you now understand why I'm willing to strike bargains when I would rather see you all dead. Mr North has more to answer for than any of you, but the people in this room constitute some of the most powerful forces on Earth. We're going to need you all, in the future, as well as right now."

Jason walked over to the mezzanine railing and looked out over the atrium.

"I think there will be one or two more territories before we're done," he said. "Progress is slow, so it may be three; I can't be certain. With the extra territories I've claimed, the strength of the anomalies will be greater than what we've seen in the past. Expect them to have all the strength of category four monsters. Only by working as a team will we be able to beat them."

Jason turned to look at Adrien Barbou, standing at the back with Gerling's henchmen.

“Barbou, there’s no point taking you. You’ll die, and die fast. As for your people, Gerling, I’ll leave that decision up to you.”

Gerling turned to his own group, eight silver-rankers.

“I can enhance your powers,” Gerling told them. “Give you the strength to contribute. Make no mistake, though: If you join, the chances of death are high. That’s true for all of us, let alone, you. I won’t force anyone, and I won’t think any less of you for staying back. But you’ve heard the stakes. There are worse things to die for than saving the world.”

Gerling’s men looked at each other. One of them looked reluctant as he spoke up.

“I’m sorry, boss. I don’t... I don’t want to die.”

“It’s okay,” Gerling said. “When I asked you all to join me, this was never a part of the deal.”

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In the end, half of Gerling’s eight participated. The other four stayed behind with Barbou in the pagoda, while Jason led the rest outside, where Shade had taken the form of a jet hovering over the driveway, a platform descending on cables to allow people to board.

As the plane winged toward the new edge of Jason’s domain, Jason sat alone in the cockpit, although Shade was doing the piloting.

“Mr Asano, may I ask what all of the explanation was in aid of?” Shade asked. “It hardly seems worth the effort.”

“Which is exactly the point,” Jason said. “If my intention was to kill them all, why bother?”

## Chapter 451

### The Very Opposite of Fantastical

The sky was bleak, grey and sunless, reflecting the architecture of the city. The territory was another city, but the very opposite of fantastical. Uniform concrete buildings were set out in plain, hard lines, like a distillation of Soviet Bloc design.

Just as the territory was a bland version of a human city, the anomalies were a bland version of human. Identical human men in identical black suits with sixties tailoring, they were a clone army of men in black. They fought with what looked like ordinary pistols, although they packed a gold-rank punch. In close, they used a martial arts style that was fast and efficient, but robotic and predictable.

Once he had killed and drained enough to accelerate his speed, Jason was confident enough to engage them directly. Although the anomalies had gold-rank speed and strength, it was on the lower end of the scale and they lacked any exotic abilities. Jason was almost able to match them in speed and had a full host of powers to pit against them.

His cloak intercepted bullets, and while many punched through its silver-rank protection, his blood robes soaked some more of the impact. His regeneration and drain rapidly healed what damage still made it through. Jason was long past the point where even moderate injuries were a distraction.

Once he was in melee range, Jason's cloak was once again key to his defence. It hid his unconventional movement, which was made all the more deceitful by feints. As his aura told one story, his body told another while the truth was something else entirely. He was still only beginning to use his aura feints effectively, but the minds of the clone-like anomalies turned out to be as bland as their appearance. Despite the precision and efficiency of their hand-to-hand skill, their lack of improvisation and imagination made their attacks predictable and their defences vulnerable to Jason's unorthodox style.

Jason had been through thousands of enemies in hundreds of fights. His current strength was the product of battles with monsters, anomalies and the risen dead; vampires, superheroes and even other essence users. His fighting style, the Way of the Reaper, was too comprehensive to be mastered by ordinary humans.

The myriad techniques and variations of his style went beyond martial arts. Its practices dipped into gymnastics, acrobatics parkour, stealth, climbing, even sleight of hand. There were too many techniques to remember without the enhanced memory of a magically-enhanced spirit attribute. There weren't enough hours in the day for the practice required not just to master but maintain that level of skill.



Sophie and Jason both practised the Way of the Reaper, but in very different ways. Sophie came to it through training, taking a subset of the whole and building a style perfect for herself. As she moved through iron and bronze ranks she had expanded her repertoire, continuing to make the style her own without attempting to grasp the whole. She took what she needed, discarded the rest and was the stronger for it.

Emir Bahadir had studied the style more than most outsiders to the Order of the Reaper. He had hypothesised that the style was originally intended to be learned through skill books. Only then, with the skills magically imprinted, could the full style be mastered. This was his conclusion after several years of searching for remnants of the style, with dozens of subcontracted adventuring teams investigating the ruins of the fallen order.

Only through using skill books was Jason able to enjoy the level of proficiency he had obtained but . He had dedicated considerable time and work into making the style imprinted on him his own and not just a series of programmed responses, but would never have Sophie's focused mastery. While it was an important cornerstone of his combat technique, it would never be the foundation that it was for her.

Jason simply couldn't dedicate the training time Sophie could to a selected subset of techniques. He adapted to his circumstances, environments and enemies, using spells, direct combat, sneak attacks and skirmish tactics as he needed. For him, the movement and stealth techniques were just as important, if not more so, than the martial arts. The broad-spectrum learning from skill books was a good fit for him.

Sophie was so good at what she did that she would pit her skills against any opponent, trusting herself and the abilities. Jason would assess an opponent and change himself, looking for the most appropriate of his available approaches. He would even switch it up against the same enemy as they adapted to him.

Fighting the men in black anomalies, Jason began with skirmishing hit-and-run strikes while his enemies were faster than him. They roamed the city in groups of four and he took some hits along the way, but nothing he couldn't endure. He left each encounter with a slew of afflictions in his wake, letting them do their work as he moved on.

Jason's biggest setback in the fight was the inability to the affliction-spreading butterflies. The anomalies gunned down the brightly glowing, blue and orange butterflies with machine-like precision before they could do their job. The only benefit was that the butterflies exploded on being destroyed, causing an amount of disarray in the orderly anomalies that Jason could make the most of.

As anomalies started dropping from the accumulated afflictions, Jason drained them and grew faster. He started fighting more directly, matching his skills and powers against

their clockwork techniques. He took a battering at first, sometimes being forced to escape, but slowly learned what did and didn't work. The uniformity of the enemies meant that a trick that worked on one anomaly would be effective against them all as they never seemed to learn.

Ultimately, these anomalies proved to be a weak match-up against Jason. His butterfly failure aside, his specific abilities were filled with answers to the challenges they posed. Being numerous but relatively weak aside from their resilience, Jason's afflictions were able to chew through their physical fortitude. Once he caught up to them on speed, their intimidating fighting technique was something of a paper tiger while their firearms were a minimal threat.

The others all had their own approaches, staying relatively close together at first before spreading out. By separating, the anomalies were less likely to converge into larger groups and overwhelm them.

The vampires each fought using different powers, with the human-like anomalies serving as self-serving blood bags. Elizabeth was a master of luring groups into traps set out using blood rituals, fuelled by the blood on the anomalies already killed. Klaus fed on the anomalies' blood to grow stronger and faster, starting with a low gold-rank baseline and growing to dangerous levels as he fed again and again.

The final vampire, Georges, also fed on the anomalies, to a different effect. With each feeding, he became more and more like them, taking on their rigid mannerisms and clean, precise movements. He even started to look more like them, with their bland faces and rigid body language.

He started using their fighting style but, unlike them, was able to learn and innovate. He swiftly reaching the point of roundly besting them at their own game, even conjuring one of their pistols.

Todd the necromancer had already ordered his ghoulish army to move overland towards the sight of the battle before Jason had even expanded the territory. He consumed their energy rapidly but replenished their numbers by animating the dead anomalies. The zombie versions were only silver-rank and lacked their skills, but as cannon fodder and magic fuel, they got the job done.

Gerling moved with his four offsideers, using his unsealed essence ability to make them more powerful. They were not a match for the anomalies, but Gerling was. He would act as the spearhead, charging in, ignoring bullets burying themselves in his flesh. A charging punch to the gut doubled-over an anomaly, followed by a thunderous uppercut

that shot it into the air. Gerling grabbed its leg as it flew up and hammered it back down, slamming it over and over, as if shaking the dust from an old rug.

Gerling's men capitalised on his powerhouse charge attacks and used their slight numerical advantage to maximum effect. Jason even supplied them with pistols looted from the anomalies, as those picked up directly would not work for the humans.

Mr North offered roaming assistance. He used webs to set out magical rune traps to complement Elizabeth's. He bound anomalies in webs to help Gerling and his team when they struggled. He even took his true form of a car-sized spider from time to time, draining the anomalies of blood with the enthusiasm of the vampires.

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So long as Jason didn't retreat into his inner territories, the anomalies entering from the exterior of the domain would make their way around the ring-shaped territory in pursuit of him. Going back to the first abnormal transformation zone, Jason had discovered that unless he retreated to his domain's inner territories, the anomalies would not invade there.

The latest territory was huge, being the outer ring of Jason's entire domain, and the fighting seemed endless. The essence users consumed spirit coins to maintain their energy, while the gold-rank blood of the anomalies was a feast for the vampires, possibly due to their human form. Even so, after a dozen hours with no end not in sight, the group started to flag. Of them all, only Jason was used to the ceaseless fighting.

Jason had cleared out entire proto-spaces alone or with Farrah. During the monster waves he had fought for days on end in Broken Hill and Makassar, and clearing vast territories, full of anomalies, was familiar to him now. He also didn't need to rest for anything but mental exhaustion, able to replenish his stamina and mana at need by draining anomalies. He also didn't need to stop and let his recovery attribute heal his injuries. The closest they had to a healer was the necromancer, but his sinister life exchange powers were sealed and useless.

The vampires had never faced armies of monsters, and Gerling had always been tactically deployed by the Network. Mr North was both literally and figuratively a spider in the centre of his web, rarely taking direct action.

Oddly, it was the weakest members of the group who held up the best. Todd was relatively safe behind a wall of ghouls and felt less of the strain. Gerling's henchmen had participated extensively in both proto-space and monster wave clearing, with two of them having even fought at Makassar. This gave them similar experiences with endurance battles to Jason.

Jason had Shade helicopter everyone but himself to the closest inner territory, while he remained behind. As the holder of the domain, the anomalies would not move inward so long as he didn't either.

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It took days of constant fighting before the territory was fully claimed and the greater anomaly appeared. Jason had been hoping for a UFO or a mothman, but it turned out to be a single, normal-sized man in black. His face was identical to the others, but his suit was of a more contemporary cut, compared to the sixties styling of the others.

The subsequent fight turned out to be the greatest struggle the group had faced in all their time in the transformation zone. The anomaly wasn't especially powerful in and of itself. It was stronger and faster than the normal anomalies, but only at a low-mid gold-rank level. The problems it posed Jason and his team were twofold.

The first was that it possessed a dazzling array of miniaturised high-tech devices. These ranged from a powerful energy pistol blasting heat and kinetic energy, a force field projector and even a short-range teleporter. These were the primary tools at the anomaly's disposal, although far from the only ones.

"Was that a shoe laser?" Jason asked. "Is it bad that I kind of want him to win?"

"Shut up, Asano!" Gerling roared.

There was also a discreet jump pack on its back, to which was attached several small, disposable devices with powerful effects. A tube containing a small rocket killed one of Gerling's henchmen and severely injured the others, taking them out of the fight.

The second problem posed by the greater anomaly was that it wasn't as mentally limited as its lesser cousins. It was able to innovate and adapting to Jason and the others over the course of the fight.

Disaster struck when the anomaly charged up its pistol, teleported next to Todd and fired directly into his head, killing him. This put the pistol into some kind of charging cycle but the group couldn't take advantage as the now uncontrolled ghouls went into a frenzy. They only escaped due to the vampires managing to control at least a portion of the ghouls and they were forced to retreat. They were forced to leave Gerling's companions behind, who were inundated by the ghouls.

Away from the greater anomaly, Jason handled the bulk of the ghouls with the doom butterflies that swiftly spread to annihilate the weak ghouls. By the time he was done, the greater anomaly had tracked them down and the butterflies swarmed it. It destroyed them with some kind of rocket but the resulting explosion massively weakened its force field, putting Jason and the others on the front foot as the battle resumed.

In the end, it was the advantage in numbers that allowed them to kill it. Gordon's disruptive-force beams helped further weaken the force field. Mr North and Elizabeth set down traps they lured it into. By the time it was dead, every one of the survivors had taken severe damage. Jason's familiar, Gordon, had his vessel destroyed by the anomaly attempting to preserve its force field. This was a blow to Jason, who lacked the considerably rare materials to resummon him.

They all healed rapidly, the anomaly containing more than enough energy for both the vampires to feed on and to fuel Jason's blood harvest spell. Gerling was the slowest to recover, relying only on his gold-rank recovery attribute, yet that was far from slow. His arm was blackened and almost torn off after suffering multiple hit's from the anomaly's energy pistol, yet was back to normal by the time they returned to the pagoda.

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The survivors were in the mid-level suites in the pagoda, recovering from days of combat. Gerling had lost half of his people and Jason had lost a familiar, albeit temporarily. They had agreed to a full day of rest before taking the next step.

Jason wasn't going to risk transfiguring his new domain until they were ready for whatever came after, unsure what would happen once he completed his domain. Strangely, the distant shapes in the gloom seemed no closer than before, despite Jason having expanded into almost every territory. He did not estimate there to be more than one or two left at most.

Would there be some terrible, astral guardian in the final territory? Were the shapes in the gloom echoes of astral beings that would never be seen and pose no threat? Jason was hoping for that one more than he was expecting it.

There was still the remnants of a ghoul army running loose, although they were weak, scattered and uncontrolled. Until Jason resolved the transformation zone and reintegrated his domain with Earth, he would be unable to trigger the defences and eliminate them.

After warning the others that they should take the time to mentally prepare to face unknown challenges, Jason spent the day in meditation, readying himself for whatever was to come.

## Chapter 452

### Small Mercies

Jason had made a tradition of triggering the territory transfigurations alone on his balcony, but he changed his pattern because he was unsure of what would come next. Shade's VTOL plane form was hovering just outside the pagoda entrance, blasting wind. Jason went outside to join the three vampires, Mr North and Gerling.

Standing with them, Jason closed his eyes and initiated the change. The others sensed nothing from Jason's newest and most distant territory, but Jason felt it immediately start transforming. To Gerling and the others, Jason was just standing still with his eyes closed. This continued as the remote territory took time going through the transfiguration process.

"Asano?" Gerling finally asked.

"Sorry, it's been done for a few minutes," Jason said. "I was just standing here like this to annoy you. I'm saving the world, Gerling, not ordering a coffee. Shut up and wait."

Eventually, the process reached its conclusion.

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- Your domain now encapsulates the entirety of the transformation zone and convergent astral space. You have successfully integrated and stabilised the physical and astral components of the space.
  - Your domain now abuts the dimensional membrane between the physical and the astral. Due to the damaged nature of the dimensional membrane, an astral rift has formed, allowing the intrusion of external forces.
  - To fully incorporate your domain into the physical reality without further damage to the dimensional membrane, excise the external forces maintaining the rift in order to close it.
- 

Jason opened his eyes. He could sense the dimensional rift at the boundary of his domain and he could sense astral entities pouring through. Most astral beings were unable to exist in a physical space, even one infused with astral energy like the domain Jason had formed from the transformation zone blended with a collapsing astral space. One that could was an astral being Jason was familiar with, although these were more powerful than the ones he had encountered in the past. His eyes snapped open.

"Let's go."

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One of Jason and Shade's first interactions, before Shade had even become Jason's familiar, was Shade's warning Jason and his companions about vorger. Now Shade gave the same warning to Jason's new companions, making him want his old ones back.

"The vorger cannot exist in a true physical realm," Shade explained as the plane flew rapidly in the direction of the rift. "Until it is fully integrated with Earth, this space still contains some properties of the astral space we were all in when it formed. This is how they can exist here."

"So, why don't we integrate the place, then?" Gerling asked. "Shoving it back into Earth was the point of all this, right? Why not do that and kick these creatures out while we're at it?"

"Because something is maintaining the rift they're using to enter from the astral," Jason explained. "I can feel the rift. I can feel whatever's out there, waiting as it holds the rift open."

"Whatever?" Gerling asked.

"It's not a vorger," Jason said. "It's something else. It feels familiar, but I can't quite sense it enough to recognise."

"You said waiting," Elizabeth said. "Waiting for what?"

"For whoever defends this realm," Shade said. "It is common for astral beings that can enter semi-physical space to feed on physical beings. That energy anchors them and allows them to stay. When the vorger do this, they warp and deform flesh. If they do it enough, the person is turned into a flesh abomination, their soul forever trapped inside. They no longer control their own bodies, yet cannot pass into death unless someone kills them."

"You want to avoid them doing that," Jason said. "I've seen those abominations and you don't want to be one."

"You still haven't explained why we don't just shut it all down and end this," Gerling said.

"Because we may have stabilised the transformation space, but now we have rogue elements running around inside it," Jason said. "We have to purge them and then we can finish it and finally get out of here. After that, we can go back to trying to kill one another."

"The vorger are incorporeal," Shade warned. "Without a power that allows you to affect them, or an affinity to the astral, they can touch you while you cannot harm them in turn. They are, however, subject to spiritual forces. You all have strong auras. If you can wield them as weapons, they will be effective."

“That shouldn’t be a problem for the essence users amongst us,” Mr North said, looking at Jason and Gerling. “The rest of us have auras that are less actively controlled and more inherent to our nature.”

“You will likely be unable to make use of your auras in the appropriate manner,” Shade acknowledged. “I recommend you leverage what abilities you have as best you can.”

“I think I can help,” Gerling said. “I have a power that lets me pass off some power to others. You saw me using it to enhance my men. One of the things I can do with it is to invest you with a power that hurts ethereal stuff. It’ll shield you a little, but mostly add special damage to your physical attacks. Good for ghostly stuff and pretty good for breaking magic shields, too.”

“It’s called disruptive-force damage,” Jason said and Gerling gave him an assessing look.

“Must be nice to have a power that gives you all the answers.”

Disruptive force damage was a bane to incorporeal creatures, but Jason’s best source was Gordon, who was still awaiting a resummons. He was not concerned about the vorger personally, though, as he had many tools to fight them. His ability to make soul attacks alone was even more dangerous to them than Gordon, with the only question being if they were strong enough to endure it.

Unlike the anomalies, whose power was tied to the level of the transformation zone, these external invaders varied in rank. They were a mix of silver and gold-rank, the golds being the ones that gave Jason pause. The true threat was the entity just beyond his senses, however, due to not yet having entered his domain. He had a very bad feeling that the strain of power he sensed was diamond-rank, in which case all their efforts could easily be for naught. He did not voice this concern, since there was nothing to be done about it anyway.

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Unlike the anomalies that appeared all around a territory, the vorger poured in from a single rift in the sky over Jason’s latest territory. They seemed to be no fewer in number, though, which meant that the ghost-like creatures formed a sea of translucent white, glowing faintly in the dark sky. They were eerily silent, even as they stormed out of the astral, giving them an uncanny air.

The Communist Bloc style city had transfigured into a grim city of night, with dark, narrow alleys and moonlight glistening off rain-soaked streets. Jason immediately thought



of the establishing shot of pretty much every Batman movie. It was a good environment for the vampires.

Although the vorger seemed endless, they were being rapidly annihilated by Jason and his companions. Jason was the most prominent, with any vorger coming remotely close getting annihilated by soul attacks. Even the gold-rank ones put up little fight and the area around Jason became an empty bubble in a sea of ghosts as he moved around to sweep them up.

The most prominent difference between Jason's approach and the others was that when he assaulted the vorger with soul attacks, they made a noise. Normally silent, even as the others dispersed them by various means, Jason's attacks made them let out a glass-shattering screech. Since Jason was wiping them out in job lots, the battle was punctuated by chorus bursts of ghostly death shrieks.

Gerling required more effort than Jason to disincorporate the vorger with his aura, but he quickly caught onto the means. Once he figured out how to make a powerful weapon of it, he was like a giant with a hammer smashing through them.

Mr North and Elizabeth teamed up to use their unique ritual magic variations to set up defensive rituals, reminding Jason of Clive's combat style. Mr North created a web-pattern magic diagram set out in the middle of a street. He and Elizabeth stood in the middle of it and any vorger that came near found itself entangled in a web, despite its ethereal nature.

Elizabeth in turn, set up five ritual circles around the central web diagram. From each, a nest of long red tentacles emerged to lash at the vorger. They were able to extend and snake off around corners and down alleys, as if infinite in length. They sought out the vorger, wrapped around them and squeezed, the ghostly entities popping like balloons. This proved a terror to the vorger, with only Jason's aura being more avidly avoided.

The other vampires did not fare quite as well, at least at first. Gerling's power helped, but only so much in the face of the ghost tsunami. Georges, who could take on the powers and skills of things whose blood he drank, was troubled at first because the vorger had no blood to drink. Jason changed that for him, by casting a spell. Georges learned of it when he heard the icy voice Jason reserved for enemies.

*"Bleed for me."*

One of the vorger in Georges' face turned from translucent white to a red mist, with the familiar, coppery scent of blood. To Georges, it smelled amazingly appetizing and he sucked it in like he was playing tricks with cigarette smoke. Georges himself became a little translucent and suddenly he could touch the vorger as if they were physical things.

Their touch was now harmless to him. Georges unleashed his inner beast, his gold-rank speed and vampiric ferocity tearing a path through the vorger.

The last vampire, Klaus, suffered the worst. Jason also made some of the vorger in front of Klaus bleed, but consuming them was not as effective. Consumption made Klaus faster and stronger, neither of which was of great help against ghosts. Even if partially inured to their attacks by the energy infused into his body by Gerling's power, Klaus was slowly warped by the touch of one creature after another.

Jason was unable to cleanse the effect with his power as the vorger's touch left behind an affliction of the magic type, which fell outside his power to dispel. This was common amongst cleansing powers, which tended to affect curses, diseases and poisons. Mostly, the kind of things Jason did to people. Magic cleansing was the purview of magic specialists like Clive, along with dedicated healers.

When the vorger made a final surge, each combatant was isolated in a final effort by the ghostly creatures to overwhelm them. A massive wave attempted to inundate Jason's aura and overwhelm it, requiring him to dig deep and push back. He weathered the powerful and costly offensive in which countless vorger perished but was left mentally drained. He felt like he was low on mana, even though he was almost fully topped off.

The vorger finally gave up and retreated, leaving only scattered stragglers behind. Jason and the others regrouped and started clearing the stragglers, aside from Klaus. They found what was left of him, transformed into a pile of formless, grotesque flesh. It was already dead.

"I believe," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow, "that his vampiric nature has given him the mercy of death. Vampires sustain a false life using the life force they have stolen through blood. Once he was taken too far from his vampiric state, he could no longer contain that life force and it escaped, leaving the flesh to die."

Jason crouched to take a closer look at Klaus' remains.

"I know we were ultimately enemies," he said, "but that's a rough way to go out. And rough ways to go are my bread and butter. At least his soul won't be trapped in a twisted prison of his own body."

"Small mercies." Elizabeth said as a spear plunged into Jason's back, bursting out of his chest.

"Which is more mercy than you'll get," Gerling said, leveraging the spear shaft to heighten Jason's pain. "It's time for this idiotic game of charades to end."

## Chapter 453

### Salus Mundi Suprema Lex Esto

“Do you have any idea how hard it was to get the materials for a category four suppression device?” Gerling asked, jerking the spear again. “I’m impressed that it takes something this strong to shut your powers down.”

Jason collapsed to the ground, the spear still running through him. He groaned through gritted teeth. The surviving vampires and Mr North gathered around.

“Fortunately,” Gerling continued, “there’s been an upswing in category four proto-spaces. So while you were running around killing superheroes and playing with your magic door, I’ve been getting ready. Even so, I never could get the materials for a suppression collar. It had to be something implanted.”

Again he twisted the spear.

“To my delight, the implantation was allowed to be quite rough. As you’re experiencing.”

“You have no idea what you’re doing,” Jason said. “I’m the only one who can—”

Jason was cut off by Gerling’s boot to the back of his head, crushing his face into the wet asphalt.

“You think you’re so special, Asano. The chosen one, destined to save the world because no one else can.”

Gerling ground Jason’s face into the street with his foot.

“You’re not special,” Gerling said. “The stuff you have is. So I’m going to take it from you. I’m going to take it all.”

“You can’t.”

“Impossible just means you haven’t taken the time to figure it out,” Gerling said.

“While you were running around, claiming to be the Messiah, I was making preparations, as I said. This spear...”

Jason groaned with pain as Gerling yanked it sideways like a boat tiller.

“...was only the start.”

Gerling open a small leather pouch on his belt and took out a rainbow orb, the size of a large marble.

“This,” Gerling said, “is much more impressive than its size denotes. I’d even say it’s the most impressive thing on this planet, for the simple reason that it can claim possession of anything else.”

“Contingencies on contingencies,” Mr North said. “The spear was a failsafe, in case whoever ended up with the door proved unreliable or uncontrollable. I should congratulate you, Mr Asano, on being quite thoroughly both. Mr Gerling and I have come to an equitable arrangement where he will be my agent, and the face of saving the world going forward.”

“You can’t,” Jason said. “The door is a part of me. It’s part of my soul, now.”

“And this will draw it out,” Gerling said. “I really hope it hurts.”

“Do you even realise who made this thing?” Mr North asked. “The power of a great astral being is literally beyond your mind’s ability to comprehend. It lacks the frame of reference to contextualise it.”

The pained expression on Jason’s face vanished as his eyes went wide.

“Oh,” he said. “I knew I sensed something I recognised.”

The spear blurred and vanished, along with Jason’s injuries as he got to his feet.

“I may not be able to contextualise the power of a great astral being, but I know even they can't violate a soul. Maybe you could have sold me on it since I don't know that much about great astral beings. Except that I've lived through the proof. The Builder huffed and he puffed but my soul was built out of bricks.”

Jason pushed out with his aura at full strength. The diamond rank power that had him in its grip was reliant on his accepting the scenario, but even so, it was hard to push away. It was like being trapped under an unconscious person, who wasn’t actively trying to keep him down but was so heavy they were hard to escape. Jason gave it everything he had, straining to push back. Only due to his abnormal strength and the unique traits of his aura was he able to force away the oppressive power.

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#### Title: Indomitable

- Your repeated defiance in the face of more powerful enemies and willingness to sacrifice everything for a cause has marked your soul. Your resistance to aura suppression is further enhanced and ignores rank disparity.
- Your aura signature has changed. Your unwavering resolve floods your aura and can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power or when projecting your aura. Allies within your aura have increased resistance to aura suppression.

---

Gerling, Mr North and the vampires shimmered and vanished as the true scene was revealed. Jason was lined up next to Gerling and the vampires. In front of them was a nightmare hag, a diamond-rank entity that had little direct power but could manipulate

fears. It looked a lot like Shade if he's been put through a heavy wash cycle; a ragged, shadowy figure. It had one arm outstretched, connected to Gerling and the vampires with three beams of silver-blue light. The luminescence of the light that had just been severed between Jason and the creature was still fading away.

Mr North was also in the line of nightmare victims but had broken free of the trance state even quicker than Jason.

"You threw it off," Jason said, bending over with a weary groan, hands on knees.

"I have accepted my fate, Mr Asano. I have nothing left to fear."

"Sure," Jason grunted. "How the hell are we supposed to kill a nightmare hag?"

"You know what this thing is?" Mr North asked.

"I've faced one before, but Shade knows more than me."

One of Shade's bodies emerged from Jason's shadow.

"For diamond-rank creatures," Shade said, "nightmare hags are breathtakingly weak, at least in direct confrontation. They are, however, almost impossible to eliminate. More typically, they are bound and used for various purposes, as happened with the Order of the Reaper."

"I thought they manifested your fears as a weapon," Jason said.

"That is their means of fighting, and what makes them so dangerous," Shade said.

"They can manifest diamond rank spiritual constructs in the form of people's fears. Their method of feeding, however, is to place people in a scenario where their fears consume them."

"If you've encountered one of these in the past," Mr North asked, "how did you handle it then?"

"Other people's fears are like a box of chocolates," Jason said. "You never know what you're going to get. It created a diamond-rank version of me that was a lot more like you. One that no longer sees lines to cross. Apparently, these hags being hard to kill doesn't apply to their own manifestations."

"It killed that hag so that you would eventually become the same as the manifestation?" Mr North asked.

"No," Jason said. "It killed the hag because it refused to be controlled."

"The manifestations are accurate, then," Mr North said.

"I hope not," Jason said. "Shade, any idea on how to handle this thing?"

"To anchor itself here, it will need to feed on at least one physical being," Shade said.

"You and Mr North have denied it, leaving the others."

"We have to save them?" Mr North said. "Help them escape, somehow?"

“Shade, if this thing gets denied, it goes back through the rift, right? Job done?”

“That would be my understanding,” Shade said. “I would like to be clear that this is not a scenario in which I am comfortable making definitive statements.”

“We stick to the plan, then,” Jason said, pulling an object from his inventory.

---

Item: [Travis' Big Rocket] (silver rank, rare)

*Definitely not compensating for anything (consumable, bazooka).*

- **Effect:** Launches a rocket containing vast and destructive powers of solar and kinetic energy.

---

Jason slung the huge rocket over his shoulder.

“Curse my sudden, yet inevitable betrayal.”

“What is that?” Mr North asked.

“A sun nuke, by way of astral reconfiguration. I thought I'd have a Godzilla monster or something as an excuse to fire this thing off, but having Gerling and the vamps just stand there in a trance is fine too. Can't dawdle, though. Got to get this done before any of them die or break free.”

Jason opened a portal, which Mr North stared at.

“So, you can,” he said.

“Yes,” Jason said.

“You shipped us all back and forth via vehicle to reinforce that you couldn't portal?”

“Got to have an escape plan. Are you going to fight for your life, Mr North?”

“No,” Mr North said, his voice weary. “You won't let me go and the world can't afford to lose you. The welfare of the world must be the supreme law. I knew from the moment I was trapped here that this moment would come, and perhaps it's for the best. I do have a conscience, you know. I suppose it's time to pay for my many mistakes. I do love my adopted world, you know.”

“I believe you,” Jason said. “Sometimes the things we love are the things we hurt the most.”

A window appeared in front of Mr North.

- 
- [Jason Asano] has invited you to form a party. Accept Y/N?

---

“Why? Mr North asked.

"I'm about to leave a henchman to kill all my enemies while I go away, assuming everything went to plan. Classic villain move, so I want some assurances."

"That I die."

"Yes. I considered letting you live, you know. I do believe you want to help."

"But you can't trust the way I might choose to help in your absence."

"I like you, Mr North, in spite of everything. But I also fear turning into you. And I can't leave that behind me when I'm gone."

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➤ [\[Noreth\] has joined your party.](#)

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"Noreth?"

"The name my essence user gave me. It was very precious to me, once."

Jason nodded and handed the rocket to Shade.

"There is a vault," Noreth said. "It's hidden under one of the remote magic accumulators Miss Hurin set up to accumulate and feed magic your village in Australia."

"How did you manage that?"

"With great difficulty. Even lacking the main village defences, Miss Hurin was not incautious about its protections."

"How do I open this?"

"It will only open for two people. You and I."

"Is it a trap?"

"It has traps. I advise you to have Miss Hurin assist you. Speaking of which..."

"Barbou," Jason said.

"Please ask her to make it quick and clean. Call it a final request."

"I'll ask. If she says no, I won't push. She'll probably say no."

"I know. Now, leave. You've tarried too long already."

Jason nodded.

"Goodbye, Noreth."

"Goodbye, Mr Asano. Do better for this world than I did."

Jason moved to step through the portal when Noereth called out to him.

"Actually, Mr Asano, there is one more thing I'd like to do, if you'll permit me."

\*\*\*

Jason stepped out of the portal into the mezzanine lounge of the pagoda. Barbou and Gerling's men rushed up as Jason walked towards the elevating platform. Jason didn't so much as glance in their direction, instead, holding out a hand slick with blood. Leeches

sprayed out over Gerling's men but left Barbou untouched. He skittered away fearfully as the others collapsed, screaming and yanking leeches off themselves. Jason rode the elevating platform up as his portal sank into the floor as the other end of it was destroyed.

"Thank you, Shade."

"You are welcome, Mr Asano," Shade's voice came from his shadow.

Jason reached the top floor master suite, went into the study and took a red crystal from a drawer. It was the one that Elizabeth had given him, in order to survive whatever attack she assumed he had planned. It lit up as it activated, a beacon to draw in the soul after the vampire died. Jason took out a reclamation orb and touched it to the crystal. The crystal started growing dim as the orb started filling with rainbow light. It did not fill all the way before the crystal blackened and crumbled.

---

➤ You have defeated [Georges Albon].

---

"Georges?" Jason muttered. He extended his senses throughout his domain, which covered the entirety of the transformation zone. Neither Elizabeth nor her blood crystal appeared anywhere within.

"Shade," Jason said. "I believe I've been played. Could a disembodied soul successfully leave the transformation zone, even while it's sealed like this?"

"The only way to trap a soul, Mr Asano, is in its own body, as with the flesh abominations. A god of death can guide a soul, but not bind one. The Reaper can open passages for a soul, but also cannot bind one."

"Open passages?"

"I will not be drawn into speaking on the role of my progenitor, Mr Asano. You know this."

"Fine. I think Elizabeth had her blood crystal outside the transformation zone this whole time. She somehow got Georges' crystal, maybe even made it herself. She passed it off as hers so I'd think I had her at a disadvantage."

"Then she has likely escaped."

\*\*\*

The blast zone of the nuclear solar rockets was a crater. Ash and dust blocked out the sky and the former gothic cityscape had been levelled for kilometres. Noreth dug his way out of the ground from where he had buried himself deep, inside a cocoon of magical webbing. It was just enough that he survived given that, while the force of the rocket was



immense, it was still only a silver-rank power. Noreth was gold rank, as were the preparations he made to shield himself.

Even with his preparations, his cocoon had been crushed, as had Noreth himself. Buried underground, he had to wait for bones to snap back into place before digging his way out. Once he did, he started laying out a ritual circle with webs.

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There was a rush of rainbow light in the crater, not unlike the manifestation of a monster, but this was something else. Gerling appeared from the light, bare naked, his immortality power having brought him back even from full bodily annihilation. He was still coming to his senses, when webs started whipping out from a series of nearby ritual circles, binding him between them.

“I was a little worried you’d come back before I was ready,” Noreth said. “I was lucky, in this regard. Also, in that you never unsealed your strength power. You won’t be able to pull yourself free, not without more tricks than you have in your bag right now.”

“What do you want, North?” Gerling snarled.

“You know I only came to this place for you, right? You took my friend.”

“Someone like you doesn’t have friends.”

“I may be a monster, Mr Gerling, but not an unfeeling one. You took my friend and I came to get him back. Because of this, he and I will both soon be dead. I can’t save either of us, Mr Gerling. Or you. When you think about it, you have led all three of us to our doom in this place.”

“We can team up. Fight Asano.”

“No, Mr Gerling. Mr Asano was kind enough to let me take a small measure of revenge on the man who brought us here. After that, I will take my own life.”

“It doesn’t have to be like this,” Gerling said.

“It didn’t, Mr Gerling, but now it does.”

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Jason opened his eyes and his vision departed from the crater where Gerling died.

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➤ **Party member [Noreth] has died.**

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“So, that’s it then,” Jason said.

“Will you pursue Elizabeth after reintegrating the transformation zone?” Shade asked.

“No,” Jason said. “I’m done with vampires and magic factions. It’s time to finish the job and go home.”

“Home, Mr Asano?”

“Yeah. This world isn't it anymore.”

## Chapter 454

### Something Other Than Human

“Dr Asano, I would like to thank you again for letting us set up the interim government here. Best estimates are over a year before Paris will be restored to the point of initiating repopulation.”

“Thank you for helping push through the Transformed Relocation project with the UN, Mr President,” Yumi said. “The first of the transformed will be arriving this week.”

“It’s not entirely selfless, Dr Asano. We will be in Saint-Étienne for a time, but for the transformed, it will be a home. Many have been treated poorly after losing their humanity and I believe that things will be more harmonious if we earn some goodwill.”

Yumi and the interim French president walked along an empty street. The city of Saint-Étienne was, for the moment, still largely empty. Most of it was occupied by Jason’s spirit domain, which had remade the city. There were some remnants that the transformation zone hadn’t absorbed, left in ruins by the vampire occupation. It was not back to the way it was. The new Saint-Étienne was more like a French city as imagined by a man whose knowledge of France came from watching too many whimsical French films. The interim president was diplomatic enough not to point that out.

The vampires had abandoned France after the transformation zone was unsealed and Jason’s spirit domain became the centre of a new high-magic zone. It was retaken by eager Network forces, although it was made clear that Jason’s spirit domain only answered to one man.

“If I may ask,” the president said, “where is your grandson? He has never been big on public appearances but it’s like he fell off the side of the world in the last few months. The Network would very much like to—”

“We are aware of what the Network would very much like,” Yumi said. “Jason has not fallen off the side of the world quite yet. He has eschewed his worldly concerns, outside of preparing the clan for his departure.”

“If I may ask, Dr Asano, what exactly is this nebulous threat your grandson is saving us from? He’s not exactly forthcoming on the details, which is why so many doubt him. I’m an administrator, chosen both for my ability to get the reclamation up and running and for lacking the charisma come election time. I know little of magic and am just one more person struggling in a world that has completely changed.”

"I think you might be a better politician than you claim, Mr President. I don't understand all that much myself, but how long has it been since there was a transformation zone, anywhere in the world?"

"Forty-two days."

"That's where my grandson has been, Mr President."

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"United Nations Liaison to the Asano Clan?" Jason asked.

"You're the one who started taking over chunks of sovereign territory," Anna told him.

"That was never my intention."

"Then give it back."

"Anyone who wants it can come and take it," Jason said, his voice an iron fist in a silk glove. Jason led Anna from the helicopter pad outside the pagoda in Saint-Étienne, taking her inside. The atrium was full of people, very few of whom were human. They walked through the crowd towards what was now a bank of elevating platforms, part of various design changes Jason had made to accommodate the clan. The pagoda was ultimately a cloud construct, even if it rarely showed, and could be altered with alacrity and ease.

"I'm surprised no one is looking at you," Anna said as they navigated the crowd. "You're more or less the head of state, at this point."

She was awkwardly stepping around delicate elves and huge leonids while they unconsciously parted for Jason. Anna quickly learned to walk right behind him.

"They don't see me. Or, more precisely, their minds actively ignore my presence. It's an aura manipulation trick I picked up some time ago from Craig Vermilion. There is a lot to learn from how vampires use their auras."

"There's a new leader who had managed to rise up amongst the vampires," Anna said. "They've separated from the Cabal, who pretty much rule Africa and Russia at this stage. She's concentrating power in parts of Europe and Central America, pulling back from aggressive action."

"I've met Elizabeth," Jason said lightly. They arrived at the elevating platform and got on, alongside several other people.

"So I've heard," Anna asked. "I'd love to hear more."

"She and I spent some time together. I tried to kill her but she outplayed me."

"Some of our intelligence suggests that she's holding back until you're gone. That she wants to avoid you trying again and knows that you intend to leave this world behind."

"That's more likely obfuscation," Jason said. "She's probably just taking the time to consolidate her power."

“Our analysts agree. The ancient vampires seem to have realised that they need to work together but that isn’t natural for them. Many aren’t happy about pulling back after the successful attacks on network holdings in Germany and want to take advantage of the civil war in the US.”

“She’s not stupid enough to poke the dragon while it’s chasing its own tail. Not my concern, in any case. The vampire war is your apocalypse, Anna, not mine.”

“And how is your apocalypse going?” she asked. “A lot of very powerful people made very sure that I’d ask.”

“It’s all finished but the paperwork,” Jason said. “I need to finish up in the other world but for practical purposes, the job is done. To the best of my understanding, the dimensional membrane stopping the earth from spilling out the side of the universe will slowly recover over the next couple of decades. At the very least, things here are no longer escalating. Barring some god-like dimensional entity showing up to make trouble, you can rest easy.”

“Some kind of public announcement would be nice,” Anna said. “We can do it with the UN, make it nice and legitimate. There are a lot of worried people out there, and a lot of crazies stoking trouble. It would be nice if you could explain it all.”

“What do you want me to do, Anna? Go on TV and start talking about alien gods? You want the UN to endorse a message that goes directly against most of the world’s religious beliefs? Remind me what the revelations about magic and monsters did for global religious harmony?”

“We can couch the language to excise anything contentious.”

“People never much liked the truth, Anna. There’s little point feeding them half of it. Let them think what they want. I don’t care anymore.”

Anna looked at Jason’s impassive face. She remembered the wild, animated man she had met just a couple of years ago. He seemed much older despite, if anything, looking younger. There was a tiredness to him, to the way his bizarre eyes watched the world around him.

“Coming back to this world has done more to you than going to the other one did, hasn’t it?” she asked.

“Any sign that Gerling or Mr North are still alive?” he asked, ignoring her question.

“I thought they were both dead. I heard you saw it with your own eyes.”

“I looted their bodies, but I’ve been deceived before and death isn’t always the end. I know that better than most.”

“There has been no sign of Gerling or Mr North. As best we can tell, they both are truly dead. I have no information on Adrien Barbou, either, past Gerling raiding the EOA headquarters and taking him. I don’t suppose you know his ultimate fate.”

“He’s dead. That, I am certain of. Is the EOA showing signs of recovery?”

“No. Somehow, someone got access to the vast majority of their funds and siphoned them away. They lost half their leadership. More, once you realise how much Mr North kept from the others, which we’re still only finding out about now. Recovery isn’t possible and do many of its people are being absorbed into different Network factions.”

Jason nodded absently but didn’t say anything.

“Jason, we traced where the money went.”

“We’re taking in non-humans from all over the world, Anna. Even with the infrastructure I’m bringing to the table, that takes a lot of funding.”

“The UN has offered to help with that.”

“Talk to my uncle Hiro. He’s managing the relocation program on our end.”

The elevating platform took them to the pagoda’s portal chamber, now a warehouse-sized space occupying an entire floor. The walls had archways much larger than those Jason created himself, all of which were open portals. It was a hubbub of activity, with people, forklifts and even supply trucks coming in and out under the direction of a harried group of Asano clan members in visibility shirts.

Jason led them to one of the portals where Asano clan members were checking everyone going in and out.

“Patriarch!” one of them said, startled as Jason stopped masking his presence from her. She was nineteen years old and Jason’s second cousin. He had given up on trying to stop the clan members from calling him that.

The clan structure had been instigated by the former members of the Japanese Asano clan, mostly Asano Akari’s father. Nothing had been heard from the Japanese Asano clan, led by Akari’s grandmother, Noriko.

Jason had not been on board with formalising the clan at first but was railroaded by his grandmother. Yumi had told him that if wanted a say in how the clan was organised, he was welcome to increase his participation in administering it. Jason had declared surrender, washing his hands of the whole thing.

“We’re going through to Slovakia,” Jason said.

“Of course,” Jason’s cousin said.

Jason and Anna went through the portal, arriving in an almost identical portal room. They took an elevating platform up to what was now known as the Patriarch’s suite on the

top floor and Jason led them out to the balcony. Compared to her last visit, when it was ruined and empty, all was repaired and odd folk roamed bustling about the streets. Celestines and leonids, elves and even more exotic people. The once devastated landscape had been repaired under the attentions of Jason's father, Ken.

"It's looking better," Anna said.

"Yes," Jason said. "My father has found it very fulfilling. There's a lot of damage to be fixed around the world and my father's powers and experience are well-suited to handling them."

Anna turned to look at Jason.

"You wanted to take him with you," she intuited.

"He has found a new purpose. I won't try and deny him that."

"So it will just be your sister and her family leaving with you?"

"No," Jason said. "They've elected to stay."

Neither his face nor his aura betrayed his feelings on that.

"My sister had taken the food logistics of the relocation project in hand," he said.

"You'll be seeing a lot of her in your new role, I suspect. Her husband is working with the new medical infrastructure and research team."

"I heard you poached Gladys from the Network. Ketevan wasn't happy."

"We need a lot of people with a lot of expertise. Learning the ins and out of many new species is quite the challenge, even before you start getting into essence users and any other magical quirks that may appear."

"What about your niece?"

Jason bowed his head.

"I'm not the uncle she knew. Not even the one who came back, from before the monster waves. They love me, but they look at me and don't recognise these eyes. Or the man behind them. I scare them."

"I won't lie, Jason; you scare us all. You went into that transformation zone with some of the most powerful beings on the planet and only two of you survived. One of you came out queen of the vampires and the other came out with a kingdom."

"I'm not a king. Mayor, maybe, although that's my grandmother, really."

"Jason, unless you want to let the French and Slovakian authorities reclaim the land, you're a de facto head of state. They're playing nice now, while they're scared and happy that the vampires are staying away. The time will come, though, when they start looking to take that land back. And even if they don't, what will you do with it? You know you have

more territory than the Vatican, right? That's not even counting those astral spaces of yours."

"I've left grandmother in charge of all of that," Jason said. "She'll be more amenable to cooperation than I am anymore."

"She can't do the things you can do."

Anna's aura senses weren't sophisticated enough to understand what Jason did but everything around her seemed to go still.

"Rather than try and get me to do the things I can do," Jason said, "you should be very glad that I've elected not to. I'm done with it all, Anna. I'm leaving the clan with as many resources as I can and I am going. This world is better off without me, now, and I'm better off without it."

"This world could use you."

"This world did. Goodbye Anna. Shade, take her to see Grandmother."

"Of course," Shade said, emerging from Anna's shadow.

"One more thing," Anna said. "Some rumours I've heard."

"You mean you've checked in with your spies within the clan."

She didn't deny it.

"Is your clan resuming the human augmentation research that the EOA was conducting? You've been scooping up certain former EOA people the Network had its eye on. The Network has more expertise in this area. They're willing to collaborate."

"I'll bet they are. I don't trust you to avoid the same shortcuts that Mr North did," Jason said. "I have given the clan only a few hard rules to follow in my absence, and the way that research is conducted is at the top of the list. I've already made sure it's impossible to replicate the existing process for creating silver-rank augmented humans."

"The clockwork cores," she said. "We've been debriefing ex-EOA as their organisation collapses in on itself. The source of the cores went missing, months before Mr North died. We believe he took it."

"He did."

"How much of North's assets did you get your hands on? Did you torture it out of him in the transformation zone?"

"I didn't torture him, Anna. He was a monster that wanted to be a hero and got it very wrong. He hoped that I wasn't the same as him. I hope that too."

"You're not a monster, Jason."

"It feels like this world wants me to be. Do you remember what I used to be like? I got kidnapped, and a few hours later we were sharing some fun banter in your kitchen."



"That wasn't fun for me, Asano. I was afraid you were going to kill my wife."

"Oh, that reminds me. Shade, give her the painting on the way out."

"Painting?" Anna asked.

"Something Dawn left behind. A gift for your wife."

\*\*\*

Jason and Farrah had spent weeks drawing out the ritual circle by shaping and placing stones. They were using a football field in an isolated outback town in Australia, never repopulated after the monster surge. The entirety of the circle could only be made out from the air.

Using their wings of fire and wings of darkness to survey their work, Farrah and Jason reviewed and tweaked the largest and most powerful ritual either would likely ever be involved in. At the very least, they wouldn't expect to top it before reaching diamond rank.

After hours of work every day for the better part of a week, they were finally done. They sat in the sun-weathered wooden stands of the old football field, the last paint job flaked and gone before Jason was born.

"I think we're good," Farrah said. "A few more tests to make sure. The final assessment has to be yours, though."

Farrah was a better and more experienced ritualist than Jason, especially with a ritual of this scale. She was the one making sure that all the aspects worked together while Jason, as the specialist in astral magic, took the lead on the ritual's purpose and core design.

"We've pretty much made a more elaborate Stonehenge," Jason said. "In a footy field. That's pretty awesome."

"We're opening a passage between realities and you think being in a dusty field in a town that was all but dead even before the monsters is what makes it impressive?"

"I do crazy dimension stuff all the time," Jason said. "Rebooting Stonehenge is a new experience for me."

"So," Farrah said. "We can go whenever, now."

Jason looked up at the sky, clear and blue.

"I wanted to come back home better than I left," Jason said. "Now I think I'm leaving it worse than when I arrived."

"We've talked before about Rufus telling you that there'd be hard choices," Farrah said. "I don't think he quite had all we've been through here in mind but only the scale was

off, not the sentiment. Sacrificing your sense of self-worth because that's what it takes to do the right thing doesn't make you bad, Jason. It just makes you feel bad."

"When I faced a nightmare hag in your world, my fear was power corrupting me. When I faced one here, my fear was not being as special as I thought."

"I hate to break it to you, Jason, but you needing a little humility is not news."

"Did someone tell you that you're good at cheering people up? They lied to you."

"Jason, you're the second most important person in the world right now. That would mess with anyone's head. Add in the fact that you out-skill everyone here to an absurd degree, now. But don't worry; back in my world, I'll take you to Vitesse. In any big adventuring city, you'll just be some guy."

"I am looking forward to just being some guy again," Jason said.

"That won't be a problem. You're strong, I'm not playing that down, but over there you're far from unique. You and I are what they call guild level."

"Rufus told me to stay away from adventuring guilds."

"That's because guilds in dinky little province towns are just pointlessly aping how they do it in the big cities. There, all the top adventurers are in guilds. Guild level means you have the skills to be recruited by a real guild. Once you see it for yourself, you'll see why we were so dismissive of the Greenstone adventurers."

"You're in a guild?"

"Yeah. The Burning Violet guild. It's an old guild but after Rufus' grandfather became guild leader it became more and more associated with the Remore Academy. It's Rufus' family, plus allies like Gary and me. Gary's around the bottom of guild-level, to be honest, because he's as much a craftsman as an adventurer. Splitting your training time comes at a price."

"The guild must be strong if it's full of Remore Academy graduates," Jason said.

"It's okay, but you're underestimating the level of guilds in a city like Vitesse. Plus, most of the big-family graduates don't join. They have family connections that lead into the more prestigious guilds, but connections only open the door. The Remore Academy gives them the skills to walk through it. Mostly it's the lower-class graduates who join the Burning Violet guild."

"There are lower class graduates?"

"Sure. The Remore Academy has a huge scouting program, looking for people with potential. The academy does scholarships, puts them up in dormitories and trains them until they're trying to escape, free tuition be damned."

"You didn't attend the academy, did you?"

"No. I was already an adventurer when I met Rufus and Gary."

"Undead taking over a town, right?"

"Yeah. You know, it's funny; I used to think of that as this great horrible disaster.

Compared to Makassar, though, it wasn't even a big deal. The numbers were smaller and the Adventure Society sent a whole contingent of gold-rankers, so there was never any doubt about resolving it. That's why they let low-rankers like us participate."

"That would be nice," Jason said. "I'm looking forward to seeing people more powerful than me and being happy instead of afraid."

"Well," Farrah said. "It sounds like you're ready to go. Just take a good look as you're saying your goodbyes. You won't be back for a long time. While you're doing that, I'm going to Switzerland."

"Switzerland?"

"So I can essence-up the most important person in the world. I'm going to need some essences, by the way. And some awakening stones. The good stuff, too; no cheapies. I could have done this a year ago if you'd told me she moved to Switzerland a quarter of a century ago. We didn't have to worry about the Americans at all."

"I didn't know."

"You need to stay on top of these things, Jason."

"You didn't know either."

"I'm from another universe!"

Jason shook his head.

"You know I can't portal you all the way to Switzerland, right?"

"The United Nations is loaning me a plane. I promised Anna I'd help with the protection magic on the new UN building."

"They're going ahead with that?"

"Well, with the US civil war still going on, it's not exactly a testament to peace."

Jason groaned.

"I don't want to get caught up in more mess, Farrah. You know that."

"I know, but Anna's a friend. While you were running around stomping out monster waves, I was working with her to get the grid back up and running. She's a good person, Jason."

Jason got to his feet.

"I know," he said. "But I'm just done with it all. I have to let it all go."

She stood up as well and gave him a warm but concerned smile.

"Are you sure you're ready for that?" she asked. "The places, sure, but the people?"

“Yeah,” Jason said sadly. “I’m sure.”

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Jason made his farewells in France, on a warm autumn day. Taika complained about his mother and her opinions on French food. Travis wanted to go with Jason but knew that his contribution would be critical to the coming war with the vampires. He did, however, jump at the chance to give up his previous affiliation and work with the Asano clan. Jason extracted Travis’ family from the United States personally.

At the end, Jason drifted down the River Furan on a cloud construct pleasure yacht with his sister and niece. They didn’t speak of magic or monsters or leaving. They enjoyed each other’s company, played one of Greg’s board games out on the deck. Jason ignored the occasional glance Erika made at his strange eyes and what he read in her aura when she did.

After watching the sunset together, he opened a portal and sent them back to Saint-Étienne. He was about to close it when a small figure dashed back through and clamped him in a vice hug.

“Goodbye, Moppet,” he said, tousling her hair.

Jason’s body no longer had the physiological mechanisms to produce tears. He had been something other than human for a long time, but never had he felt it more than in that moment.

## Chapter 455

### Everyone Calls Me Gary

In the city of Greenstone, Gary Xandier and Rufus Remore walked quietly along an empty street, the night lit up by magical lamposts. Gary was a huge lion man, yet looked sunken and small, with none of his signature boisterousness.

“It was a good service, I thought,” Rufus said.

“Good service?” Gary reacted angrily. “Good service? He died saving this city and what does he get? A bunch of sneering nobles, glad to see him go. They hated him. They always hated him. Tiny people who tell themselves they’re giants.”

“There were friends there too, Gary.”

“Farrah wasn’t. She’s dead, Rufus. Now Jason’s dead. How long until Hester shows up at my door to portal me to your memorial service?”

“You could stick around. Watch my back.”

“I was watching Farrah’s back. We both were, and what could we do? Watch her die, that’s what. Adventuring was meant to be fun, Rufus. Remember that? See the world; help the people who need it. It turns out we’re the people who need it, Rufus.”

Gary hung his head.

“What will you do now? For a team, I mean. There’ll be no shortage of takers back in Vitesse.”

“They can stay there,” Rufus said. “I’m going to stick around, work on the new training centre.”

“Good,” Gary said. “Be a teacher, Rufus. Maybe we’ll live long enough to be old friends.”

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A flatland of long, yellow grass spanned to the horizon under a wide-open sky. Little more than a few sparse trees broke up the endless sea of gold, shifting gently in the breeze.

A remote village of low buildings was the sole population centre, with the few other buildings spread across the massive territory being ranches or other operations with no more than a handful of people. A lion-like leonid woman marched up to a cottage several kilometres outside the solitary village.

Accompanying the woman was a human man, who followed her to the cottage door. The building was a small stone affair, with an attached smith’s forge. The woman stood outside the door and bellowed a name.

“GARETH!”

Inside, Gary winced. The door hit the wall as it was slammed open, Gary’s hangover making it feel like it had hit his head on the way.

“Mum,” he groaned. “Did you open the door by yelling at it? Also, you know everyone calls me Gary.”

“No, everyone calls you the perpetually drunken blacksmith who half-arses his work. Are you sleeping on a pile of your dirty laundry?”

“I don’t suppose you’re here to wash it?”

“Although it might surprise anyone who knew you, you’re a grown man, Gareth. You’re old enough to do your own laundry.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because somebody is too good to come visit his mother. Magda had to come get me, which does not reflect well on you as her employer.”

“That’s not what I pay her for.”

“No, you pay her to manage the business side of your smithy, which is hard to do when the smith spends all his time in a wine-soaked heap. You’re not an onion Gareth, so stop trying to pickle yourself.”

Gary patted around until his hand fell on an empty bottle and he held it up, even as he still lay in a pile of dirty clothes. He peered at the label.

“This is wine? I may have been ripped off.”

“You should listen to your mother, Gary,” came a familiar voice. Gary propped himself onto his elbows to see Rufus standing in the doorway, behind his mother.

“I’m going to let you two boys talk,” Gary’s mother said. “Afterwards, Gareth, you and I are going to have some words about keeping a clean house.”

\*\*\*

Gary eventually managed to navigate himself to actual furniture and sit at his dusty kitchen table. He leaned over it, propping his head up.

“Gary, you aren’t exactly looking your best,” Rufus said.

“You are,” Gary said. “Are you polishing your head again?”

“I don’t polish my head.”

“Sure you don’t. You hit silver?”

“The monster surge precursor signs have been going on for well over a year now, even if it increasingly seems like the surge will never come. There’s been a noticeable increase in silver-rank monsters in Greenstone, which got me over the threshold.”

"I thought you were going to run your new school instead of going back to adventuring."

"It's only a training annex, and I am. But you know what standards are like in Greenstone. All the good adventurers leave, so someone has to step up."

"Didn't a bunch come back for the monster surge?"

"We've been waiting for the surge for years at this point, Gary. These surge precursors have been showing for more than a year. It should have been weeks; months at the outside. People won't wait forever, especially in a place like Greenstone where all but the lowest ranks stagnate."

"So, you're leaving?"

"No. I'm still getting the training annex ready. It won't go into full operation until after the surge. The academy won't send people before then. Danielle Geller left. Managed to hit gold rank, or so I've heard."

"Good for her."

"You know, Gary, you were bronze-rank before I even had essences."

"It's not my fault you're immature," Gary said.

"I'm sorry," Rufus said. "Was I just called immature by the man who once forgot to wear pants to a fight?"

"I'm covered in fur, Rufus. It's easy to miss."

"Oh, I remember what you were covered in. It matted in your hair and we had to buy crystal wash to get it out, remember?"

"Right, yeah. Farrah wanted to just cut it out of my hair with scissors. She would have left me looking like a sick stray cat."

"Gary, you are a sick stray cat. Your mother asked me to come here from another continent. She's worried about you."

"She's my mum. That's her job."

"I'm worried about you."

"Don't, Rufus. Just don't."

"I'm not going to push. I do have something for you, though."

"The way this conversation is heading, I'm not sure that I want it."

Rufus took a small object from his pocket and placed it on the table.

"What is that?" Gary asked.

"You know what it is," Rufus said.

Gary picked up the monster core and held it between the thumb and forefinger of his huge hand. He turned it over, examining it before setting it back on the table.

“What do you want me to do with this?”

“If you want to push your smithing to the next level, you need to rank up. You’ve been bronze rank for my entire adventuring career and you’re on the very brink of silver.”

Rufus tapped the monster core with his finger.

“If you’re really done with adventuring, then this is how you rank up, now.”

Gary looked at Rufus silently for a long time.

“So, that’s what you’re doing. Trying to wake me up by making me choose.”

“Gary—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Rufus.”

Gary stood up, picked up the monster core and walked to the door of his modest cottage. He opened the door to reveal the huge span of yellow grass outside. He threw the monster core out into it with all his considerable strength.

“Rufus, you’re my best friend in the world and I love you. But get out of my house.”

\*\*\*

“I don’t know where he is,” Magda said. The leonid woman had been approached in the village by an unusual man, asking after her employer.

“He hasn’t been staying in his cottage,” Magda continued. “He comes in every couple of weeks and works for a few days, then goes again. I’ve just been going up to collect whatever he’s made to sell twice a month.”

Magda was nervous. The customer had the immaculate perfection of a very high ranker, so if he grew angry at Gary’s less than excellent work ethic, there was little they could do about it.

“It’s fine,” the man said, smoothly producing a gold-rank spirit coin. “Go home for a while and... Mr Xandier, was it?”

“Yes, Gareth Xandier. But everyone calls him Gary, except him mum.”

“When Mr Xandier is ready for your services again, he will find you. It may be some time, so this should carry you in the interim.”

He held out the coin for her to take, but she hesitated.

“Young lady,” he said, despite looking half of her forty years, “I assure you that I will take more offence at the rejection of my offer than the loss of the coin.”

Magda’s eyes went wide and she plucked the valuable spirit coin from his fingers, hurriedly, then was shocked at her own rudeness. He laughed lightly, holding up a hand to forestall her apology.

“It’s fine. I’ll have to go find him myself.”

“You aren’t going to hurt him, are you?”



“Oh, I probably am,” he said. “But there’s nothing you can do about that anyway, so you’d best run along.”

\*\*\*

Gary was unconscious in a hammock strung between two trees. A sword buried itself in one of the trees, cutting the strap holding up the hammock and dumping Gary on the ground.

Gary yelled angrily as he woke up, untangled in the hammock and tore it apart with his considerable strength. He scrambled awkwardly to his feet and looked around, seeing and sensing nothing. He was in a copse of thin, widely spaced trees and there shouldn’t have been space to hide.

He looked to the sword sticking out of the tree and yanked it out. He immediately realised it was his own work.

“This is one of mine,” he muttered.

“I’m surprised you’re willing to admit that out loud,” a voice said from behind him.

Gary turned to find a slender, handsome man standing before him. His clothes were as immaculate as his face, both out of place in the wild savannah. Gary couldn’t sense an aura, which could have meant silver rank, but his instincts told him otherwise. This was a dangerous man.

“What do you want?” Gary asked.

“I don’t just go around buying terrible swords, Mr Xandier,” the man said. “But I found that one to be especially infuriating.”

Gary looked at the sword in his hands. It had gone into and out of the tree without so much as a blemish. He hadn’t exactly put his heart and soul into making it but it was an entirely serviceable product.

“It’s a perfectly adequate sword,” he said, in defence of his work.

Gary didn’t see the blow coming or even feel it land. One moment he was standing there with a sword in his hands and the next he was tumbling across the ground. Only when he rolled to a stop did the sting of the strike hit him.

“Adequate,” the man said as if spitting out a slice of rotten fruit. “The next time I hear that word come out of your mouth, Mr Xandier, it won’t be a gentle tap like this one you get.”

He was already standing over Gary by the time Gary rolled over and painfully sat up.

“If you want your money back,” Gary told the man, “go ask the guy you bought it off. Also, kiss my pert, hairy rump.”

The man gave Gary an assessing look.

"You don't care what I do to you, do you? You have some sense of my power and it just doesn't matter to you."

"Yep," Gary agreed. "So, kill me or sod off; I've already got a smug friend. He died, but I'm not looking to refill the position."

The man continued to stare at Gary.

"I see," he said. "You tried your hand at adventuring and it didn't go so well. Lost people. I hate to break it to you, Mr Xandier, but that is hardly a fresh story. It's been told forever and will be told again forevermore."

Gary let himself fall back in the grass.

"Oh no, I'm not special. Now you've tracked me down for this great revelation, can we get back to the part where you leave me alone?"

The man plucked a wooden chair out of the air and sat down next to Gary, still lying in the grass.

"Mr Xandier, my name is Virid Martine."

"Gary. Stop calling me Mr bloody whatever."

"Very well, Gary. Like you, I am a practitioner of the smithing arts."

"Then make your own sword and leave me alone."

"Gary, you will find that as you move into the upper realms of any craft, the principles you've formed start to inform your work. Over time, this becomes the basis for the nuances that make your signature style unlike that of any other."

"If I told you my core principle was solitude, would you go away?"

"No. We're here to talk about my core principle. It's a simple one, being the idea that all skill, from sword mastery to dance to cooking to smithing, has foundational skills from which everything else stems. No matter how sophisticated or advanced the technique, it is, in some way, an extension of the foundational techniques."

"I hate to break it to you," Gary said, "but that principle is as much yours as it is everyone's who has ever done anything."

"Yes," Virid agreed. "One might consider it the core principle of all skill. Yet, despite knowing this simple truth, so many go on to disregard it. They rush towards complexity, always seeking to push the boundaries without fully exploring the depths that the fundamentals have to offer. In doing so, they fail to grasp that foundations are where the greatest depths lie. The very things they seek are fragments of a greater whole."

"That's a great story, really. I'm not sure why you're telling me, but you've given me a lot to think about. So, if you could just leave me to that..."

The sword Gary dropped when Virid hit him came flying through the air to slap into Virid's waiting hand.

"Everything we make tells a story," Virid said. "About us, about who we are and how we look at the world."

He turned the sword over in his hands.

"This sword tells the story of a man who is patient. Who doesn't rush to the end but fully explores that place he's already at, knowing there is more to learn. A man who spent years honing the basics of his craft rather than move on to the new, flashy thing. It also tells the story of a man who no longer cares. His skills are ready to move on, to advance his mastery, yet he lacks the will. He's become lazy and careless, with only the dedication of the past allowing him to get by on a series of shamefully adequate works."

Virid threw the sword and it shattered into pieces, falling into the grass.

"Because of my particular focus, I like to peruse the work of those still on the early stages of the path. When I saw this sword, I was infuriated. That someone whose steps on the path were so solid had lost their way."

Virid stood up, grabbed his chair and shoved it into the air, where it vanished. He then closed his eyes and stood in place, silently. Eventually, Gary sat up to look at him.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for something," Virid said. "My aura senses are expansive enough that it can take a little time to hone in on something specific."

"Maybe you should be practising that, then, rather than harassing people who were perfectly happy in their hammock before you showed up."

Virid's eyes snapped open.

"Happy? Are you genuinely going to sit there and claim to have been happy?"

"Comfortable, then."

"Comfortable is an animal unaware it's waiting to be slaughtered."

With a gesture from Virid, a line of fire appeared in the grass but didn't burn it. An archway of blackened metal arose from the flames, which themselves then rose to fill it.

"On your feet, Mr... Gary. It's time to go."

"I know how portals work," Gary said. "You can make me do a lot of things, powerful as you are, but you can't make me go through that thing."

"True," Virid acknowledged. "What I can do is other things, until you agree to go through on your own. Do you want me to do other things, Gary?"

Gary's only response was a groan.

"That's what I thought. Now, get up."

\*\*\*

In the chaos of a monster attack, no one noticed a fiery portal open in the middle of a village. Virid and Gary stepped out and Gary immediately started whipping his head around. The village had mustered some kind of defence, from the shattered palisades and pikes lying beside the dead, but that defence had been broken. Now the screams of villagers and the shrieks of monsters mingled in air thick with the coppery taste of blood.

“Do something!” Gary yelled. “You’re powerful enough! Fix this!”

“My help comes at a price, Gary.”

“Just do something!”

“You don’t care what the price is?”

“NO!”

Virid made a casual gesture and moments later, silence passed over the village. Looking around, Gary spotted metal spikes sticking out of the ground, impaling every monster in sight.

“There you go,” Virid said lightly. Gary flashed him an angry look and rushed off to start checking on people.

\*\*\*

Virid and Gary were walking on the battlements of a fortress town, designed to accommodate the local populations during monster surges. After the destruction of the village, Virid and Gary had accompanied the survivors there.

“The world is growing dangerous,” Virid said. “This extended period of pre-surge monster activity is becoming worse than a monster surge due to its protracted length. It doesn’t present the full threat of a surge, but the world cannot hunker down and wait out years of heightened danger. People, especially those with the least resources and greatest isolation, are becoming victims.”

“You didn’t seem to much care in that village,” Gary said. “Putting terms on helping people as they died around us.”

“You don’t get to judge me, Gareth Xandier. You don’t know the things I’ve done, but I know what you’ve done. You’ve sat around, slowly drinking yourself to death while people out there are suffering. You think you’re excused because you don’t have a portal power? Just being far away doesn’t absolve you of failing to help any more than it does me.”

“Is this what your price is about?” Gary asked.

“Yes. I’m glad that you didn’t ask what it was, Gary. It speaks well of you.”

“So, what have I put myself in for?”

“You aren’t going to back out? I forced an agreement out of you under some duress.”

“We made a deal and you kept up your end,” Gary said. “I’m not going to just go back on my word.”

“Very well,” Virid said. “As we’ve both borne unfortunate witness to, there are many people in many places in need of help. We can’t fight for them all but, as smiths, what we can do is give them the tools to fight for themselves. Weapons, armour, reinforced gates. Not big, flashy works. Basic things. Foundational.”

“Why?” Gary asked. “Why me?”

“It’s not just you, Gary. Those of us that exist at the upper reaches of power like to step in during the monster surges but this time the challenges are greater. There are few of us and so many in need. We’ve taken it upon ourselves to recruit people we feel are responsible and capable enough to help where they can.”

“You could have just asked.”

“Could I? I found you through your sword, Gary, and that sword told a story. It wasn’t the story of a man ready to help. You had to see, to remember who you are.”

“And who is that?”

“Someone who cares enough that losing people can break him.”

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Five swords were floating in the air. Glowing yellow with heat. Like a symphony conductor, Gary waved his arms and they descended into the water troughs waiting below them.

“There are advantages to silver-rank,” he muttered to himself. He had held an instinctive aversion to using monster cores, but he knew he was never going back to adventuring. More than a year of travelling between remote villages and fortress towns, shoring up their defences had confirmed it. He could do far more swinging a hammer in a smithy than he could swinging one at a monster.

That was not to say that he hadn’t taken up his war hammer. Monsters had no interest in waiting for his work to be done before striking at towns, villages and homesteads.

Gary finished the last of his work, nodding with satisfaction. This last batch of swords marked the end of another village's worth of work and it would be time to move on. He placed the swords in a crate that he easily shouldered before heading out of the smithy.

“Fuzzy man!”

The little elf girl clamped onto Gary's leg like a limpet. He plucked her off by the back of her tunic and held her out, arms and legs wheeling.

“Hmm,” he said sternly. “I seem to have developed an unseemly growth on my leg.”

The elf girl's mother came along and took her little girl.

"Sorry, Gary."

"It's fine," Gary said with a chuckle. They walked towards the main street, Gary holding the swords on one shoulder and the woman holding her toddler, still straining to reach Gary.

"She's never seen a leonid before, and she won't like it when you're gone."

"My being gone means you're more ready to face danger than when I arrived," Gary said. "I can't feel bad about that."

"So, you still intend to leave in the morning?"

"Yes," Gary said. "Providing my transport shows up on time for once."

"That's a little rude," Virid said as the crate on Gary's shoulder opened and a sword floated out. It moved over to Virid, whose annoying enthusiasm for appearing from nowhere was undiminished.

"Not bad," Virid said as he examined the blade.

"It meets your standards, then?" Gary asked.

"Well, my standards are very high."

"Then you can offer me some guidance," Gary said. "Which is good, because I have questions."

"I walked right into that one," Virid complained. "I'm starting to regret you reaching silver-rank. Of all the people I've recruited, you're the one who bothers me the most."

"The others don't want you to help their craft along?"

"Yes, but their questions are shallow and lacking insight."

"Or you just don't like the way they're developing as master smiths."

"Which is the same thing. You know that most of them don't think that grinding out swords and pikes is helping them advance their skills?"

"It's fine," Gary said. "If you don't want to help me, you don't have to."

"I didn't say that," Virid said hastily.

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The latest town to receive Gary's attention was the largest he'd visited. Although the region was remote, the town was the trade and travel hub for all the little villages around it. Gary had been a part of converting the town into a semi-fortress town, and more than once had stepped out to face monsters that threatened it.

The town was having a feast to celebrate the completion of the new walls, with tables and spit roasts set out in the central square. Gary was gesticulating with a full roast leg,

spattering fat and sauce as he told a story to the people sharing his table. He stopped as his silver-rank hearing picked out familiar voices arguing.

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“Your shields are magic,” Belinda complained to Neil. “All they cost you is some mana. Every time one of my shields gets broken I need them fixed or replaced.”

“You’re an adventurer,” Neil said. “You can afford it.”

“We’re not exactly scooping up coin running around after the herb witch, here,” Belinda said. “Not all of us come from money, Neil.”

“Herb witch?” Jory asked.

“Sorry, sweetie,” Belinda said. “I’m sure what you do is very important.”

“It is,” Jory said.

“Look, Neil,” Belinda continued. My point is that I use a lot of equipment sets, and since we hit silver I’ve been running around with garbage. I need to find someone who can supply some quality work at a decent price.”

“Lindy, that’s why we’re here,” Jory said. “I heard they have a travelling smith here who makes quality stuff.”

“You also said this was a defenceless town,” Neil said. “We just spent quarter of an hour waiting to pass the checkpoint in their giant metal wall. We could have told them we’re silver-rank adventurers.”

“You can’t just go flaunting it,” Jory said. “We’re not here to make a fuss. And don’t the new walls suggest that they do have a good metalworker here?”

“I will point out,” Belinda said, “that none of my equipment sets, varied as they are, include walls.”

“You have a big shield,” Jory said. “That’s kind of like a wall.”

“Jory?” a booming voice called out.

Jory looked ahead to where sounds of revelry were coming from the town square where lamps lit up the early evening. A huge, hairy figure was rushing down the street, brandishing a leg of meat like a weapon.

“Gary?”

## Chapter 456

### I'm the Bait in Question

At the Adventure Society dock in the city of Greenstone, Emir Bahadir's cloud palace had been replaced with a cloud ship that would dwarf an ocean liner. Humphrey, Sophie and Neil boarded via a cloud dock that led directly into the side of the ship where one of Emir's staff led them inside. They were taken to the owner's stateroom, which was less a room and more like three storeys of typical Emir excess.

In an office larger than most homes, Emir was sitting behind a desk under a transparent ceiling that showed off the blue desert sky. The elevating platform deposited the trio as Emir was completing a meeting with the Deputy Director of the Adventure Society, Genevieve Picot. She was an elf whose appearance was uncharacteristically aged for a silver-rank essence user.

Emir stood to shake her hand and she walked away, passing Humphrey, Sophie and Neil as they departed the elevating platform and she stepped onto it. Neil and Humphrey wore diplomatic expressions, while Sophie openly glared. Genevieve has been party to the political machinations that had made Sophie into a pawn, endangered with death and worse.

"Steady," Humphrey murmured.

"Don't worry," Sophie told him. "If I go after her, it'll be a better plan than jumping her during some random encounter."

"Sophie," Humphrey admonished.

"Most people only think it through to the actual killing," Sophie said casually as they walked across the office that was more like an ostentatious town square. "It's planning what comes after that matters. That's where you get caught."

Humphrey shook his head as Neil snorted a laugh. Behind them, the staff member that escorted them up was descending with the Deputy Director. Emir moved forward to greet the three. The formal office furniture dissolved into cloud-stuff before reforming into a comfortable lounge suite.

"Sit, please," Emir invited. Despite the appearance of ordinary armchairs and couches, the engulfing plushness of their true nature was luxuriously felt as the group sat.

"The time has come to leave," Emir said, getting straight to the point. "Jason's memorial is behind us and the Adventure and Magic Societies are finally done pulling you in for questions."

"It's our duty to do everything we can," Humphrey said.



“Incredibly tedious duty,” Sophie said. “They kept asking the same things, over and over. I know an interrogation when I’m in one.”

“They weren’t interrogations,” Humphrey said.

“Just because they were too weak-willed to pull out the pliers doesn’t mean it wasn’t an interrogation,” Sophie shot back.

“What kind of life choices did you make?” Humphrey asked her.

“They weren’t choices, rich boy.”

“That brings us to the main topic of discussion,” Emir interceded.

“It does?” Neil asked.

“Indeed it does,” Emir said. “Miss Wexler, how much do you remember about your life before Greenstone?”

“Not much more than flashes,” Sophie said. “I was barely more than a toddler when we came across. I remember the shipwreck and being found by adventurers and taken to Greenstone. Things before that are just fragments.”

“Do you even know the name of the city you were born in?” Emir asked.

“No.”

“It was Kurdansk,” Emir told her. “In the People’s Holy Federation of Dreisil.”

Humphrey snorted derision in an uncharacteristic display of contempt.

“People’s Holy federation,” he muttered. “The more they try to make a nation sound free and righteous, the more tyrannical and corrupt it is.”

“You’ve been?” Neil asked.

“I was travelling with my mother, not long before I first received my essences. Our airship docked there to resupply and the port master extorted the captain for so-called docking fees. I wanted to speak up but Mother stopped me. Said that’s just the way it was, there. Bribes and graft, baked right into the civil structure of the city.”

“Have you not been to Old City?” Neil asked, Sophie nodding.

“At least the criminals in Greenstone have the decency to not pretend they’re anything else.”

“Did you not hear the Duke just made the surviving member of the Big Three crime bosses the mayor of Old City?” Neil asked.

“Adris Dorgan’s goal is legitimacy,” Humphrey said. “He needs to go straight in order to fulfil his ambitions. I don’t like it, but it will take someone like him going legitimate to get Old City’s into line after years of default criminal rule.”

“That’s an oddly reasonable position,” Neil said. “Your mother tell you that, did she?”

“No,” Humphrey said, his gaze flickering downward. “Jason did. Well, then Mother said the same thing.”

“Jason and your mother always did think alike,” Neil said. “She was classy, while Jason was... Jason, but behind the curtain, I think his mind worked a lot like hers.”

“I noticed that too,” Sophie said.

“You know, Humphrey,” Neil said, “your father might be lucky Jason’s not around anymore. I think we all saw where that thing with your mum was going.”

“Wha...?”

Humphrey puffed up with rage, his eyes going wide. Sophie reached over to place a gentle, restraining hand on his arm.

“Neil, don’t be an arse,” she said, turning to face him so Humphrey wouldn’t see her trying not to laugh. She turned to Emir, who was watching leisurely as Humphrey sat glaring at Neil, who sat with a chastised expression but laughing eyes. She forcibly put the conversation back on track.

“Emir,” Sophie said. “How do you know what city I’m from when even I didn’t?”

“Do you recall last week when I told you that I would like to dig into your background?” Emir asked.

“You’ve been doing it for six months, ever since we went into the astral space?” Sophie guessed.

“I have, yes,” Emir said. “If we’re going to catch the Order of the Reaper by the tail, we can’t just keep following the trail they’re marking for us. We need to find something they didn’t put in our path and you’re the only thing we’re confident about fitting that description.”

“So, what?” Sophie asked. “You want to send me to this city and parade me around until someone tries to kill or recruit me?”

“Our plans are a little more nuanced,” Emir said, “but, essentially, yes. We intend to go fishing, Sophie, with you as the bait.”

Humphrey leaned forward, his hostility switching immediately from Neil to Emir.

“What makes you think we’ll let you use our team member like that?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Neil agreed. “We’ve had our fill of sketchy plans with no margin for error. They’ve cost us enough already.”

“I realise that,” Emir said, “but—”

“I’m not sure you do, Mr Bahadir,” Humphrey said. “You never lost a team member. Your adventuring stories are hilarious anecdotes about fighting monsters with ducks or accidentally kidnapping princes while robbing royal treasuries.”

“Exactly,” Neil agreed, suddenly in lockstep with Humphrey. “Ours are about paying in blood and death so that our homes and families aren’t annihilated by some god monster’s version of a land grab,” Neil added.

“Down, boys,” Sophie said. They both turned to look at her, half out of their seats. She raised her eyebrows at them and they sat back down.

“I’m the bait in question,” she told them. “Let’s at least hear the man out.”

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“Oh yeah,” Neil yelled with angry sarcasm. “Let’s all be human bait.”

He was sprinting alongside Humphrey through a maze of narrow alleys, dodging piles of rubbish and old crates as their feet moved rapidly across the rain-slicked cobbles.

“The choice was Sophie’s to make,” Humphrey yelled back. “Also, she’s not human. Neither are you, for that matter.”

“It’s an expression!”

“How about we get less arguing and more speed,” Sophie suggested. She was in front of them, lightly jogging backwards as she went slow to keep pace with the others. “I know you don’t have a lot of experience being chased but yelling loudly is not going to help. I suppose it’s the fault of your upbringing.”

They emerged from an alley onto a busy street, in the middle of a raucous parade. They slowed down and merged into the boisterous crowd, letting the flow take them away.

“What do you mean, upbringing?” Neil asked loudly to be heard over the parade.

“You two were brought up wealthy,” Sophie explained. “You were raised being told that you’d get everything you want by yelling loudly.”

“I believe,” Humphrey said, “that your prejudice against the well-to-do is showing, Sophie,” Humphrey said. “I cannot speak for Neil, but I was raised in no such manner.”

“Well, I can speak for me and I wasn’t,” Neil said.

“Then why is it that rich people always end up yelling loudly about the things they want when they aren’t just given them immediately?” Sophie asked.

“We do not!” Neil yelled, then slumped as Sophie gave him a pointed look.

“Perhaps some discretion?” Humphrey suggested. “We have not escaped yet.”

“It’s fine,” Neil said. “Everyone’s yelling. They’re not going to find us.”

“They found us,” Sophie said and started pushing her way back out of the crowd. Humphrey and Neil didn’t bother to look as they moved to follow.

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“Was that strictly necessary?” Neil asked as he and Humphrey poured bottles of crystal wash over themselves. The yellow oil was rapidly purged from their bodies, which

were stripped down to simple pants and no shoes. It left their muscular bodies glistening wet, rather than looking like marinated slabs of meat.

“Yes,” Sophie said, her clothes still pristine. “Completely necessary.”

They were standing in a ramshackle wooden shed in the entertainment quarter of Kurdansk. Originally a warehouse district close to the Kurdan River docks, the large plots of relatively inexpensive real estate made it the most viable place for building large theatre halls. It was a heady mix of pleasure, criminality and money that made it a dangerous but alluring place where wealth and poverty collided.

Sophie blended in easily, especially given that her dark-skinned, silver-haired celestine ethnicity was the most populous race in the city. She was the one who found a way to disguise the companions who stood out much more, by flaunting, rather than hiding them.

“You did impressively well,” Humphrey told Neil. “For an elf, you have a surprisingly low centre of gravity.”

The muscular elf shot Humphrey back a venomous glare.

“What?” Humphrey asked innocently. “You want me to pretend I don’t have the might essence?”

“Yes,” Neil said. “Yes, I do. We were putting on a show.”

Humphrey turned to look at Sophie.

“Did it have to be oil wrestling?” he asked. “I’m still not sure that being half-naked and covered in yellow grease was the best choice of disguise.”

“It worked didn’t it?” Sophie asked. “I’ll show you the recording crystal later; you both looked completely different.”

“You recorded it?” Neil asked.

“No,” Sophie said quickly. “What I did do was receive several lascivious invitations for you two.”

“Really?” Neil asked. “What kind of women?”

“It was mostly men,” Sophie said. “Women prefer more of a sleek, lean body, instead of...”

She waved her hands at the two men whose torsos resembled inverted triangles made of abs and pecs.

“...all this. I mean, it’s not bad but you’ll find a lot of women will pick lithe over bulky. You look like a kilo of walnuts in a pair of quarter kilo bags.”

Neil looked down at his body.

“Walnuts?” he asked, then over at Humphrey. “Humphrey, do you wax your chest?”

“No,” Humphrey said hastily, shifting his gaze. “The oil probably made the hair fall out. Do you wax yours?”

“I’m an elf,” Neil said. “We don’t have chest hair.”

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“Excellent work,” Emir said. “You flushed them out.”

“What is our next move?” Humphrey asked.

Sophie, Humphrey and Neil were finally safe in Emir’s cloud ship, floating above the city. Out of the low-magic region of Greenstone, the full functionality of his cloud ship was restored. It was docked to a taller example of the many towers in Kurdansk’s busy skyport.

“Your next move is to get out of the city,” Emir said. “They made an open move and we have their tail now. Your part in this is over.”

“Good,” Neil said. “My church has sent word. Asked me to join up with Jory while they have him running around isolated towns, teaching them to make cheap potions.”

“I thought he was working more like a lecturer,” Humphrey said. “What do they need you for?”

“He’s taking a direct approach,” Neil said. “The monster surge precursors are hitting these outlying communities hard and they need to be as self-reliant as they can with resources stretched thin everywhere.”

“They want to give Jory more protection?” Humphrey asked. “Won’t your church protect him?”

“We will,” Neil said. “He’s an important asset to the church. The Healer expects Jory’s work to help a lot of people.”

“Jory wants protection he can trust,” Sophie said. “Guards are fine but they won’t fight for you the way a friend will.”

Humphrey nodded.

“We’ll be parting soon, then,” he said. “At least, for a while. Which brings us back to the question of what is next for Sophie and myself.”

Sophie turned to Emir.

“Did you find anything out about my family here?” she asked.

“No,” Emir said. His aura didn’t betray the lie but that wasn’t how Sophie had learned to spot them.

“You owe me, Bahadir,” she said. “I talked my team into going along with this and you know why.”

“You need to be patient, Miss Wexler,” Emir said. “This is not an affair for bronze-rankers to dabble in.”

“Yet, you had no compunction about staking her to a tree and waiting for predators to sniff her out,” Neil said.

“Tell her what she wants to know, Mr Bahadir,” Humphrey said. “Unless you want my mother to come and ask.”

“I heard she reached gold rank,” Emir said. “Please pass on my congratulations.”

“I will,” Humphrey said. “Last time I spoke with her over water link she expressed an interest in coming to see how I was doing here. You know she never approved of this endeavour.”

“Are you seriously threatening me with a single, freshly ranked-up gold-ranker?”

Humphrey didn't say anything, simply giving Emir a wicked grin that startled Sophie. She had last seen it on the face of Jason Asano and it looked alien on the normally straightforward Humphrey. Even in her surprise, she didn't miss the subtle clenching of Emir's jaw.

“Fine,” Emir said. “Just don't do anything stupid.”

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“What do you mean, gone?” Emir asked his acting chief of staff, Wilmont. Wilmont was an elf known for his unflagging composure.

“I did tell them that you would not like them disembarking,” Wilmont said. “I sent word to you immediately, of course, but Miss Wexler was not to be deterred, despite Young Master Geller's best efforts.”

“But he followed her anyway, of course,” Emir said, not asking.

“Indeed, sir. Young Master Neil remains aboard, preparing for departure. He will be transferring to the church of the healer's skyship quite soon.”

“At least tell me my granddaughter didn't try to follow them.”

“She did,” Wilmont said. “After the fact. As a member of the household, the staff felt more comfortable in more forcibly restraining Miss Ketis.”

Ketis was Emir's granddaughter, whom Sophie was training to use her martial arts, derived from a skill book, the way Rufus had once helped Jason. Emir hoped Sophie would be a more-or-less positive role model, which wasn't working entirely as intended.

“At least there's that,” Emir said. “You should have stopped the others too, Wilmont.”

“As Miss Wexler quite vociferously pointed out, Mr Bahadir, they are your guests, not your prisoners.”

“I meant stall them, not lock them up,” Emir said. “Constance would have done it.”

“Miss Constance is not here,” Mr Bahadir. “If I were as capable as her, then I would have already had her job instead of just filling in.”

Emir rubbed his hands over his face in frustration.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was rude of me, Wilmont; I apologise. I just feel out of sorts without her by my side."

"Of course, Mr Bahadir. I am certain that Mr Morse will take pains with her wellbeing."

"Then you don't know Cal," Emir said. "He's a firm believer in strength through adversity. It's why she asked him to help her."

Emir's chief of staff, and the object of his affections, Constance, had taken a leave of absence from Emir's staff. She had left with Emir's old teammate, Callum Morse, with the intent of not returning until she reached gold rank.

After the trail of the energy vampire that possessed Thadwick Mercer went cold, Rufus Remore's parents continued the investigation while Callum returned to his usual activities. An avid monster-hunter, he was one of the few gold-rankers that obsessively worked to raise his strength with the unflagging enthusiasm of a low-ranker. He agreed to assist Constance who had renewed her ambitions for gold rank as the world grew more dangerous.

"He best bring her back to me safe and sound," Emir said, "or he and I will have words."

"You and he, sir?"

"Well," Emir amended. "Me, him and a bunch of gold-rankers I hire. I'm not an idiot."

"Would you like me to dispatch people in pursuit of Young Master Humphrey and Miss Wexler?" Wilmont asked.

"No," Emir said wearily. "I already had people waiting to follow them. They were obviously going to leave."

"Then, if I may ask, Mr Bahadir, why not have them stopped yourself?"

"I can't responsibly ask Sophie to let me put her in any more danger," Emir said. "If she insists on doing it herself, though, who am I to stop her?"

"Then why the exasperation, sir?"

"Wilmont, it would just be really nice, from time to time, to be surprised by someone making a sensible decision."

"If I may be so bold, Mr Bahadir; if what you are looking for is sensible, you may have chosen the wrong profession."

## Chapter 457

### The Past Can Wait

To all appearances, Marta Fries was an unremarkable resident of the city of Kurdansk. Like many of Kurdansk's celestines, she had dark skin and silver hair. Her small row house was no different to the others wedged together on the narrow street where she lived.

The plain but powerful aura suppression bracelet on her arm hid her silver-rank aura but also impeded her aura senses, so she didn't sense the approaching bronze-rankers until they were close to her door. There was something unsettling about the celestine; a hint of familiarity that put Marta ill at ease. She didn't dwell on it or hesitate, immediately moving to her bedroom and pulling up the rug to reveal a trap door from which she took her emergency bag.

Mara pushed aside the wardrobe to reveal the removable wall panel that she herself had installed. It had gone unused for the two decades since her friend Melody had used it in the course of faking her death. Marta now used it herself, swiftly disappearing into the night. She never sensed the gold-ranker who quietly watched her emerge into the alley.

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Sophie knocked again, this time hammering on the door with her fist.

"I don't think breaking this woman's door is the first impression you want to make," Humphrey told her. "I don't think anyone is home."

"If she knows something about my mother, I have to find out for myself."

"I understand that," Humphrey said, "but you can't conjure her into being by wanting it enough. You need patience."

She turned a glare on him and he met her gaze, unflinching.

"You've always been a realist, Sophie," he told her. "In a city full of hidden enemies is not the place to lose that."

She grimaced but gave a reluctant nod.

"We'll try again later," Humphrey reassured her.

"You needn't bother," a male voice said as the door opened in front of them. The man behind it had an unexpectedly familiar face.

"Mr Morse?" Humphrey asked. "What are you doing here?"

"The resident is gone," Callum Morse said. "She's not coming back."

"How do you know that?" Sophie asked.

"Because I watched her leave for good," Cal said.



“Are you tracking her?” Sophie asked.

“I am.”

“Tell me where she is,” Sophie demanded.

“No.”

“Why not?” Humphrey asked.

“Because you lack the strength to walk that road and I will not let you borrow mine long enough to get yourselves killed.”

“You’re going to keep that from me?” Sophie asked.

“Yes, he is,” a female voice came from behind. Another familiar face was walking up the narrow street behind them. It was Constance, Emir’s hitherto-absent chief of staff.

“You only got this far because Emir asked something of you that he had no right.”

“We agreed to it,” Humphrey said. “It was our choice.”

Constance shook her head.

“Miss Wexler’s motivation is clear and understandable,” she said. “You should know better, Mr Geller. You were raised better. Why would you go along with this?”

“Because she needs it,” Humphrey said, with a glance at Sophie. Constance waited for further explanation but all she got from him was a flat stare. She let out a weary groan.

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Emir was in the middle of a massage when his very relaxed body went very tense.

“Sir?” the masseur asked.

Emir whipped himself off the table, snatched up a robe and threw it around himself as he almost skipped out of the massage room. The moment he had been waiting for had arrived as he sensed Constance returning to the cloud ship. She had reached gold rank and come home.

Emir didn’t even bother with an elevating platform. Remoulding the ship to open a hole under his feet and through the decks below, he dropped multiple levels. His robe was one of the things flapping around in his rapid descent to the docking chamber of the cloud ship.

“This is what you’ve been up to?” Constance scolded as Emir landed in a crouch.

“What was the rule about wearing pants in front of the staff?”

Emir looked up with a grin, which turned to a frown. Constance’s normally neck-length brown hair was cropped short and her pale skin contrasted unflatteringly with the light green and brown armour she was wearing. What perturbed him was not her appearance but the fact that she and Callum were frog-marching Sophie and Humphrey in

through the docking port, along with the embarrassed-looking people Emir had sent to trail them.

“What exactly is happening?” Emir asked.

“Do you seriously think that you should be the one asking that?” Constance asked. Emir had been longing to hear her voice, although not in that particular tone. “Using bronze-rankers as bait?”

“We made our own choices,” Humphrey said.

“You’re bronze-rank,” Constance said without breaking her gaze from Emir. “You don’t get to choose danger like that.”

Sophie deftly twisted out of the grip Constance had on her arm, turning to poke Constance in the chest.

“We chose to put our lives on the line and one of us died saving a city full of people,” Sophie said. “You want to shove us around, you’re gold-rank and you can. But if you denigrate what we’ve done and what it cost us then I will find a way to kick the crap out of you, gold-ranker or not. How’s your poison resistance?”

Callum snorted a rare laugh at Constance’s nonplussed expression while Humphrey grinned proudly. Emir did his best to mask his expression, with mixed results. Callum put a calming hand on Constance’s arm.

“They’ve faced their own trials and made real sacrifices, Connie,” he said softly. “They might be in dire need of guidance but we still have to respect that.”

“Wait,” Emir said. “Connie?”

“That being said,” Callum continued, ignoring Emir, “respecting their experiences is not the same as letting them run off and get killed.”

“What were you thinking, Emir?” Constance asked, turning to Emir once more.

“How do you even know what’s going on?” Emir asked her. “You’ve been gone for a year.”

“You think you’re the only one tracking the Order of the Reaper?” Callum asked.

“I did, yes,” Emir said. “Everyone is looking at the Cult of the Builder, now. Adventure Society, governments, everyone. Are you saying you’re running your own game? Why on your own? Why not throw in with me?”

“Because you aren’t my only loyalty, Emir,” Callum said. “I’m part of the Cult of the Reaper.”

“Since when?” Emir asked.

“Since always.”

“You never told us that.”

"I told Gabriel and Arabelle."

"Everyone on our team but me?"

"You have a big mouth, Emir. Especially when you aren't wearing pants."

Callum glanced over Sophie and Humphrey.

"Your judgement isn't always sound," he continued, "and you need someone to keep you in check."

"Like Connie, here?" Emir asked.

"Yes," Callum said.

"Do you even want me back?" Constance asked Emir.

"How can you even ask that," Emir said. "I just jumped down five decks with no pants."

"We all saw," Humphrey said. "Perhaps some clothes and a little time will give us a chance to discuss things more calmly."

"You haven't lost all sense, then," Constance told Humphrey. "You realise I'm going to tell your mother about this."

At that moment, Neil appeared via elevating platform, his possessions packed into the dimensional bag slung over his shoulder. He looked around at Emir in his robe, Sophie and Humphrey, Constance and Callum, plus a handful of Emir's silver-rank operatives trying to avoid anyone's attention.

"Did I miss something? I missed something, didn't I? Nobody tells me anything."

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"There are trails to follow, but they're dangerous for you, as you are now," Callum told Sophie. "You're too weak and your team is scattered to the wind. Reach silver-rank, gather them together and I will give you what you need to take the next step."

"You don't have the right to keep knowledge of my family from me," Sophie said.

"But I have the power," Callum said, "and there is nothing you can do about it but wait. Concentrate on growing stronger."

"Surprise," Emir said. "The guy obsessed with getting stronger suggests you go get stronger."

Sophie, Humphrey, Neil, Emir, Constance and Callum were sitting in one of the cloud ship's secondary bar lounges, Emir now wearing clothes.

"If it were your family, how would you take someone keeping it from you?" Sophie asked Callum. Emir winced, breaking his gaze from where it had been locked on Constance.

"Not the approach to take," Emir told Sophie. "You and Callum have much in common when it comes to family."

"I understand your frustration," Callum told her, seemingly unfazed. "But I also know the price of letting your emotions drive you places they should not. So, I'm stopping you, until you are ready. Hate me if you like."

"That woman knew my mother," Sophie said. "And you let her go."

"She needs to go," Callum said. "You have brought attention onto her that will get her killed. She needs to disappear from more than you if she's going to live long enough for you to get your answers."

"I could have had them today," Sophie said.

"No," Callum said. "If not for the presence of Constance and I, you and she would most likely be dead, along with Emir's people trailing you."

"Then what do you expect us to do now?" Sophie asked. "Because I am done playing fish on a hook and I don't care about the stabby pricks of the Reaper."

"I'm a little curious about them," Humphrey said. "If you're part of the Order of the Reaper, why are you letting us run in circles hunting for them?"

"I'm not a part of the Order of the Reaper," Callum said. "The Cult of the Reaper venerates the principles of the Reaper. The sanctity of death."

"Sound like the church of Death," Neil said.

"We have long worked alongside the church of Death. Our values and objectives are often aligned. The Order of the Reaper is an offshoot of the cult. They started as a faction that wanted to become more active. Specifically, to accrue political power."

"That doesn't seem to fit what I know of the Reaper," Humphrey said. "Admittedly, that isn't a lot, but that shows how obvious it is."

"Yes," Callum agreed. "The order split from the cult, mouthing affinity to the Reaper while abandoning the principles that come with it. They became self-serving assassins until they overreached and were forced to falsify their demise. The so-called last bastion of the order, that you explored beneath Sky-Scar Lake, was part of a faction that sought to retain ties with the cult. They counselled reconciliation and were sacrificed for it."

"How do we not know this?" Emir asked. "Jason's Asano's familiar should have had this information."

"The shadow of the Reaper that administered the trials was a familiar from a time before the cult and the Order segregated. It was set in place when the astral space was a trial grounds for our youngest recruits, from whom our larger secrets were kept. I suspect

the order was careful in what they allowed him to learn, given that he was a part of the re-emergence plan taking place even now.”

“I don’t care about any of this,” Sophie said, standing up.

“Do not go out into the city looking for answers,” Callum warned. “They left with the woman who disappeared and all that waits for you now is death.”

Humphrey stood up as well.

“I don’t like it either,” Humphrey said.

“But you think I should let it go?” Sophie asked him.

“I think neither Mr Morse nor this city will give you the answers you want. But there are sources of knowledge greater than either of them.”

Constance put a hand over her face and groaned.

“Must you, Mr Geller?”

“This is my team, not yours,” Humphrey told her. “You can disapprove all you like, but we get to make our own mistakes.”

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Vitesse, the city of flowers. Located in what Jason Asano would know as the French Riviera, its iconic skyline was marked by huge towers with flowering vines spilling down the exterior. Known as the garden towers, most had every third or fourth floor dedicated to gardens using water, light and plant magic to create lush refuges of peace towering over the city below. They were residences for the city’s wealthy elite, meaning aristocrats and adventurers, as well as headquarters for the city’s key organisations.

The Adventure Society and Magic Society both maintained entire buildings to themselves. The continental council for the Adventure Society sat in Vitesse, rather than the capital. The royal family maintained a tower as a palace, with most of the family residing there.

The Remore family had no aristocratic title, while the Gellers had only a title from the small provincial city of their origin, refusing all others. Neither family was begrudged their residences in some of the city’s premier towers, however. On a courtyard balcony thick with floral aromas, Danielle Geller was giving her son a disapproving look.

“I always intended for you to learn from Jason Asano,” she told him. “You may have learned some lessons I did not intend, however. I’m not sure I approve of this rebellious streak.”

“Yes you do,” Humphrey said.

Danielle laughed, not denying it.

“Where is Miss Wexler now,” she asked.

"The temple of Knowledge," Humphrey said.

"Good," Danielle said, nodding her approval.

"You aren't afraid she'll get information that will send us into danger?"

"Knowledge does not give you the answers you want," Danielle said. "She gives you the answers you need."

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"Now is not the time to pursue this goal," Knowledge told Sophie. In the Vitesse temple of Knowledge's answer room, Sophie faced the manifestation of the goddess with the same boldness Jason once had. The goddess showed Sophie a different face to what she had shown Jason, now bearing the dark skin of the Vitesse locals.

"That's not the answer I came for," Sophie said.

"Yet, it is the answer you have received," Knowledge said. "The time will come when your companions are made whole. That will be the right time to seek out your past."

"My companions can't be made whole," Sophie said. "You know that."

"You would presume to tell me what I know? You are as insolent as Jason Asano, but not as adorable."

"Adorable?"

"It is time for you to go, Sophie Wexler. I will not set you on the path you want, but I do have one I think you will accept. The time has come for you to reunite with Clive Standish. He has found that the promises of those around him to be worth little and could use allies he can trust."

"Clive is in trouble?"

"He is making trouble. Whose influence is responsible for that I think we both know. Seek him out, Sophie Wexler, for the past can wait better than he."

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The city of Greenstone was in the far south of the continent that, in Jason's world, was called Africa. Compared to the low magic, largely empty south regions, the north was much more populous. The city of Rakesh, on the north coast, was the home of the Adventure Society's continental council. It was just one part of a sprawling campus combining the largest Magic Society and Adventure Society strongholds on the continent.

Prani Ajus was a Magic Society official who had come to visit the astral magic research wing. One of the research wing's officials, Lorelei Grantham, spotted her and moved to intercept.

"Grantham," Prani said. "I have no need of you at this time. I am going to see Mr Standish."

"He's caught up in his latest round of research," Lorelei said. "You know what he's like. This might not be the best time."

"Grantham, are you covering for him?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Lady Ajus."

"If you are going to lie, Grantham, do me the courtesy of making it vaguely plausible. Mr Standish hasn't placed one of his insistent requests for fieldwork in more than a month."

"Perhaps he has come to accept that they will be rejected," Lorelei suggested.

"That's what worries me," Prani said. "I will not permit him to go off on some aimless, ill-conceived mission of vengeance over some unimportant dead man."

"We promised him he would have the chance to take the fight to the Builder."

"Which he will," Prani said. "Vicariously. That man has an extraordinary mind and I will not allow some cultist to put a hammer through it. Now, enough delays. Take me to Standish."

Lorelei reluctantly led Prani through the building to where Clive was supposed to be working. Opening up the door to his workshop, she was surprised to find that he was. Behind a glass wall was a ritual room where Clive was standing in the middle of an elaborate ritual circle. With him in the centre of the circle was a metal arch, engraved with runes.

The glass wall was designed to restrict any magic that might interfere with the rituals inside while allowing sound to pass through easily.

"Mr Standish," Prani said. "I would like a report on your current activity."

Clive turned from where he was examining the arch to look back through the glass.

"Oh, Lady Ajus. Hello, Lorelei."

"Mr Standish," Prani repeated. "What are you doing?"

"What I was told to do," Clive said. "I'm unlocking the secrets of the astral magic the Builder cult uses. This portal arch, for example, is part of a transportation network the cultists and their church of Purity allies use to move about without drawing attention from the may people hunting them down."

"Alleged allies," Prani corrected.

"Of course," Clive said with an insincere smile.

"And how are you progressing?" Prani asked.

"Well," Clive said, "why don't we find out?"

He pointed a hand at the arch and it lit up with rainbow energy. Prani yelled as Clive stepped through immediately and she slapped her hand against the glass, which

shattered. She dashed forward with silver-rank speed as the portal went dormant again in her face. She wheeled on Lorelei.

“Open it back up!” Prani demanded.

“I don’t know how,” Lorelei said. “I’m an administrator, not a researcher.”

“We’re in the astral magic research department,” Prani said. “Find someone who is.”



## Chapter 458

### Dragon Lady

Belinda followed the signal of her magical device into a dusty desert gulch, a few dozen kilometres south of Rakesh. She roamed around, looking for the source of the signal. She and Clive had only been able to get an approximate location from the Magic Society campus and it was taking days to narrow it down.

"Where is the stupid thing?" she muttered, part of an ongoing stream of disgruntled commentary. "Roaming the whole damn desert. Sand in places that sand is not supposed to be."

The heat was not harmful to her bronze-rank body, but harmless was not the same as pleasant. After much searching, she found an old mine tunnel, filled with rocks and overgrown with scrubby bushes to disguise it. She used one of her powers, counterfeit combatant, which enhanced her strength and allowed her to toss out the large rocks.

She tossed out a light stone that floated over her head and followed the tunnel into the yellow stone rock face. It led to a chamber that she doubted was ever part of the mine. It was too large and the floor was worked smoother than any non-magical tool could manage. In the middle of the room, a portal arch was set into the floor.

Taking out some chalk, she started drawing a ritual circle.

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The Magic Society campus in Rakesh had magic in place to prevent portals from operating outside of certain designated zones. It was when Clive discovered that he was barred from those zones that he discovered exactly how 'insistent' the Magic Society was about his remaining on campus and focused on the tasks they fed him.

It seemed mild at first, as if they simply wanted him to be working as hard as possible. His repeated requests to conduct fieldwork were denied and his escalating attempts to leave the campus revealed that he was a prisoner in all but name. It felt like a stark betrayal from an organisation to which he had given a third of his life, even if he was no longer an association official.

Clive had always assumed that the Magic Society in Greenstone was an outlier in its corruption, courtesy of the man at the top. Now it seemed that the stain appeared in many places and many flavours. In Rakesh, where society was divided into castes, they apparently saw little problem with holding someone they felt lowly enough against his will.

Since he was barred from any area his portal power would work, Clive was forced to make other arrangements. No one suspected that the portal network that the Builder cult

used operated on such different principles to an essence user's portal that it would not be subject to the campus defences. The defence magic impeded the cult portal network, but with the right boosting rituals at both ends of a portal, passage could be opened up. Clive recorded this in his personal notes but left it out of the ones he made for the Magic Society.

Clive's assistant, Belinda, was not subject to the same restrictions as Clive. On the contrary, she was responsible for taking care of anything Clive needed done off-campus. She was not watched as carefully as Clive, the caste system that justified holding Clive leading them to dismiss her as unimportant. They did try to check any materials she brought in or took out, but she had a personal storage space. Even the Magic Society couldn't peek into that without killing her first.

It took the better part of two months for Clive and Belinda to devise and execute their plan, from making certain he understood the portal functionality, to building a device that could track down another portal to use as a destination. The biggest risk factor was the time between when Belinda set out to find the destination portal arch and when they activated it. If anyone looked into why she hadn't returned to the campus for however long it took, the whole plan could have come crumbling down. In the end, Clive had been forced to make a move he did not want to make.

Lorelei Grantham was the Vice-Dean of the astral magic research department, as well as the person who had recruited Clive out of Greenstone. Clive was fairly certain that the misrepresentation of what he would be walking into was perpetrated on her as well as him. Believing the lies herself made her pitch more authentic. Seemingly remorseful, she had paid close attention to Clive in the subsequent months, frequently shielding him from the attentions of Lady Ajus and other officials very interested in the research they pushed on him.

Clive took a large risk by trusting Lorelei to cover for Belinda, especially since he told her very little of what he was up to. Belinda had repeatedly warned him against trusting anyone, suggesting that Lorelei had been expertly playing him from the start. He wasn't entirely sure that trusting her was the right move right up until he escaped through the portal, right in the face of Lady Ajus.

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Immediately after stepping out of the portal, Clive and Belinda started eliminating the ritual circle around it to prevent anyone from following him through.

"We should leave immediately," Clive said as they. "There's a chance that someone there could devise a means to reopen the portal from the other end."

"Then why did you send me out to a hole in the side of a desiccated nowhere?"

Belinda complained. "I have sand and dust in places where neither are welcome."

"We had to make sure the arch was both abandoned and intact, for one," Clive said.

"All I could tell from the other end was that it hadn't been activated in years. I could have been damaged or obstructed."

"You think they can follow us without the ritual circle on this end?"

"I postulated a couple of ways it could be done before settling on this way," Clive said. "I didn't include them in my public notes but I'm far from the only good astral magic researcher they have. I rejected those methods because there's a solid chance they would extend the transmission time of the portal."

"Meaning that after you went in, it would take longer before spitting you back out?"

"Possibly," Clive said. "Another possibility is that I would have emerged from the destination arch over the course of several minutes."

"Does that mean what I think it means?" Belinda asked.

"If you think it means my body slowly oozing out of the portal like slime being pushed through a cheese grater, then yes."

"I think avoiding that was a good choice," she concluded.

"Agreed," Clive said.

They finished up and Belinda led him out through the mining tunnel. Belinda tossed out a floating glow stone while the tall Clive was forced to periodically duck his head under wooden support beams.

"I hope Lorel— Miss Grantham doesn't get in too much trouble," Clive said.

"She's probably in charge of trying to catch you," Belinda said. "You and Humphrey are way too trusting of authority figures. You don't have to be as suspicious as Sophie, but maybe take after Jason a little."

"Actually, Miss Grantham helped me cover for your absence," Clive said and Belinda stopped moving down the tunnel.

"What?" Clive asked, also stopping.

"What did I tell you right before I left?" Belinda asked him.

"To make sure I go to the right portal and don't land in a cultist camp."

Belinda gave him a flat look.

"Not to trust Miss Grantham," Clive sullenly admitted.

"And what did you do?" Belinda continued the interrogation.

"You were gone for nine days. That wasn't going to go unnoticed."

“You sent me to a portal hidden in an abandoned mine, lost in the middle of nowhere.”

“We needed one the cult and the church of Purity wasn’t using,” Clive said. “Every other portal arch in range was in active use. The point is that Lorelei covered for us. She even stalled Lady Ajus while I was activating the portal, all without ever asking what I was up to.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Belinda rubbed her chin thoughtfully as she stared at Clive.

“I guess she wasn’t faking it,” she mused.

“Faking what?”

“The way she...”

Belinda looked at Clive, seeing genuine confusion in his face.

“You didn’t notice?” she asked.

“Notice what?” Clive asked.

“The way she looked at you.”

“What about the way she looked at me?”

Belinda gave him an incredulous look.

“Oh, that poor girl.”

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The Pallimustus equivalent of the Mediterranean Sea was called the Gramid Passage. Due to the absence of an Arabian Peninsula, Israel and Palestine, it directly connected what Jason knew as the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. Danielle teleported Humphrey and Sophie across the Gramid Passage from Vitesse to Rakesh.

“We shouldn’t keep Carlivexistrix waiting,” Danielle said. “She’s showing us a great courtesy, coming to meet us like this.”

“Clive would go mad seeing her,” Sophie said.

“She’s not a festival attraction,” Danielle admonished. “Clive will have to live with the disappointment.”

Humphrey produced floating platforms for the trio. They were flat metal disks, only just large enough to stand on. It was a common sight to see essence users riding them about as Rakesh had a sufficient level of magic to support their operation. In low-magic Greenstone, only people like Clive and Belinda, who possessed the appropriate essence ability, could use similar devices.

Humphrey had been using them since he was a child, having travelled widely with his mother. Sophie had learned to use them during their holiday in the city of Pranay, after their first excursion in the astral space that would later claim Jason's life. Seeing her stare at the platform in her hands, Humphrey realised her thoughts and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She reached up to cover it with her own in a gesture of thanks, gifting him one of her rare smiles.

She shook off the malaise and they got moving. The buildings of Rakesh were desert stone, plastered and painted in colourful murals. It reminded her of the Cavendish district in Greenstone that was similarly styled, especially the neighbourhood people called the Rainbow Road. Unlike the mishmash of colours in Cavendish, the murals of Rakesh were both far more expansive and far more coordinated. Travelling through the streets was a soothing passage as each district's dominant colours graduated into the next.

Activity on the streets was busy but quiet, the local culture valuing calm decorum. It was a stark contrast to the raucousness of Greenstone's Old City where Sophie grew up. Most people were on foot or using animal-drawn carriages, their normal auras marking them as the teeming citizenry of the populous city. Essence users used floating platforms, either standing ones like the trio rode on or more elaborate models. Some were simple seats on a slightly larger platform, while others were ostentatious floating palanquins.

"Sophie, be sure to manage your behaviour in this city," Danielle warned as they glided along the streets on their float platforms. "Civic order is given much more precedence here than in most places. The culture is based around strict social hierarchies and respect for authority. Divergence from that is strictly punished, both socially and legally. There are allowances made for visitors, but visitors find themselves swiftly positioned in the hierarchy by their background and behaviour."

"We're only bronze-rank adventurers," Humphrey warned her. "That means a lot less here than in Greenstone. Mother is gold-rank and has already accrued some prestige here, so defer to her."

"The Geller name is also worth something here," Danielle said. "It will help us, but we must also be careful not to tarnish it."

Danielle led them to a large area surrounded by a park of pleasant gardens and long, winding pools. Many people walked along or floated over the pathways, the park serving as a major junction for city travel. Dominating the park at the centre was a vast building with multiple wings. It was not painted but made of a rich white stone, topped by golden domes.

Sophie and Humphrey followed Danielle as she made for one of the wings, approaching a pair of huge double doors, already wide open. Inside was a large atrium filled with plants that sat in pots, grew from wall alcoves and even hung from the high ceiling, either growing out directly or sitting in hanging pots. Doors led off in multiple directions and a pair of sweeping staircases curves up to the left and right.

"What is this place?" Sophie asked, looking around. There were no people at all inside.

"I told you that this city is fixated on hierarchy," Danielle said. "This is a place for those who trying to place in a hierarchy would be an insult. Diamond rankers, mostly, but not exclusively."

A door opened and a woman came walking out, a toddler waddling alongside, holding her hand. She had the ageless beauty of the magically preserved, with milk chocolate skin typical for the local human population. The toddler let out a yelp, pulled his hand free and started running across the floor, wrapping his arms around Humphrey's leg in a hug.

"Biscuit!" the toddler yelled.

"I haven't seen you in months and that's all you have to say?"

"Biscuit please!"

Humphrey shook his head.

"Did you enjoy spending time with your mother?" Humphrey asked.

The toddler transformed into a small bird and flapped up onto Humphrey's head, where he started chirping.

"You can't say this about your mother!" Humphrey scolded, throwing an apologetic look at Stash's mother, who was now standing next to Danielle and looking on in amusement. There was more chirping from Stash.

"My mother doesn't make biscuits either," Humphrey said, "but you don't see me calling her that."

"Can you understand his chirping?" Sophie asked.

"Unfortunately," Humphrey said. "The advantages of his being a bonded familiar instead of summoned."

Stash started chirping loudly.

"I don't have any biscuits," Humphrey said.

After some more angry chirping, the bird flew off Humphrey's head, transformed into a little grey puppy in midair and landed in Sophie's arms. She took a biscuit from her jacket pocket and slipped it to him, which he happily munched on.

"You're going to spoil him," Humphrey told her.

“Sophie is the best!” the puppy said and Humphrey narrowed his eyes at it.

“Since when can you use people talk in animal form?” Humphrey asked.

“I can’t!” Stash insisted, spilling crumbs. “Er... woof?”

Humphrey ran a hand over his face and turned to Stash’s mother.

“Carlivexistrix, I apologise,” he said. “I’m not doing the best job of helping your little boy grow up.”

“Oh, that’s just how they are at that age,” Stash’s mother said. “You should have seen Danielle, here. Your mother was an absolute terror. Also, please call me Carli.”

## Chapter 459

### What Could Possibly Go Wrong

“Well?” Lady Prani Ajus demanded as she stormed into the large research room in the astral magic research department. Lorelei Grantham was there, along with a half dozen researchers poring over the notes left behind by Clive.

“We found something that Cli... that Standish left behind,” Lorelei said. “He obviously wanted it to be found. It’s a means to track portal network activity. It only gives vague locations but we can use it to at least partially monitor Builder cult travel. This could be a critical asset against the Builder cult.”

“Does it cover the theory behind the operation of the portal network?” Prani asked.

“No,” Lorelei said. “It’s a practical guide to tracking. He left us a valuable assent for—”

“Irrelevant,” Prani said. “There are people all over the world looking for ways to fight the Builder cult. What matters is unravelling the secrets behind the advanced magic they use. While the other branches waste time fighting a war that will be won sooner or later, we’ll be pushing ourselves ahead for once the war is done.”

Lorelei looked at Prani with disdain.

“Do you have a problem, Vice-Dean Grantham?” Prani asked.

Lorelei choked back the bile-filled response struggling to escape.

“No, Ma’am.”

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“Carli was much more approachable than I expected,” Sophie said. “That’s not what I expected from a dragon at all.”

“Everybody needs friends they can be relaxed with,” Danielle said. “My family have been companions to Carlivexistrix since we first came to Greenstone. Her last child is still running around with my diamond-rank ancestor somewhere, as far as I know.”

They were standing in the precisely cultivated gardens of the Magic Society campus, waiting for Clive and Belinda. Thus far, they had the distinct impression of being given the runaround. Instead of Sophie and Humphrey’s team members, what they got was a stern-looking Magic Society official. Humphrey and Sophie moved to meet her, while Danielle remained where she was, casually examining a water feature.

“You’re Standish’s team members?” the official asked. “I am Lady Prani Ajus.”

She spoke to Sophie and Humphrey, but her gaze lingered uneasily on Danielle.

“Also Belinda’s team members,” Sophie added.



“Why is it that no one will so much as tell us where they are, let alone lead us to them?” Humphrey asked.

“The situation is complicated,” Prani said, earning a derisive snort from Sophie.

“The situation is shady as shi—”

“Sophie!” Humphrey barked, cutting her off. “I apologise, Lady Ajus, but I hope you can take it as an expression of our frustration.”

“I’m afraid that Mr Standish is currently engaged in a delicate matter,” Prani said. “He won’t be available for contact for some time.”

“Porky pies!” puppy Stash yelled out. “Stick it up your bum, lady.”

“Stash!” Humphrey scolded. “Who taught you to talk like that?”

“Telling people to bugger off is kind of my thing,” Stash said proudly. Humphrey and Sophie went stiff at the reminder of their lost companion.

“Lady Ajus, I apologise,” Humphrey said after an awkward moment. “We will take our leave.”

Prani’s expression showed exactly what she thought of the group’s lack of decorum, but again her gaze glanced over Danielle and she said nothing, turning and walking away without another word.

“What do you two think you’re doing?” Humphrey hissed at Sophie and Stash as they walked back towards Danielle. “What did my mother tell you about decorum?”

“That woman just lied to our faces.”

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “And how effective do you think your approach was in helping us find Clive? We’ll probably need to leverage Mother’s influence, which will not be made easier when the people she contacts hear about our behaviour.”

“You mean my behaviour,” Sophie said.

“No, I mean our behaviour,” Humphrey told her. “We’re a team, Sophie. We stand and fall together.”

They reached Danielle, who gave them a casual look.

“You will need to learn to control your impulses better,” she told Sophie.

“No I don’t,” Sophie said. “I need to get powerful enough that when some woman tries to hide my friends from me I can hold her upside down and shake her until she talks without people getting all whiny about it.”

Humphrey very carefully didn’t smile. His blank expression didn’t fool his mother, who gave him a weary, disapproving head shake.

“Power,” Danielle said to Sophie, “is certainly an intrinsic part of being an adventurer. As you rise through the ranks, however, you will find that so is diplomacy. This is why you're still only a one-star adventurer.”

“What do we do now?” Humphrey asked. “Head for the local Geller family and have them apply some pressure?”

“I think we should hear out the priest first,” Danielle said.

“Priest?” Humphrey asked.

“Behind us,” Sophie said. Humphrey turned and spotted a cleric in church of Knowledge regalia walking towards them.

“Good day, sir priest,” Humphrey greeted. “I am—”

“He knows who we are, Humphrey,” Sophie cut him off. “Church of Knowledge, remember?”

“Miss Wexler is correct,” the priest said, taking a small tube from within his robe and holding it out for Humphrey to take. “My goddess simply asked that I deliver this.”

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“The current location of Clive Standish and Belinda Callahan.”

The priest bowed and retreated without saying any more.

“What was that about?” Sophie asked as they watched the man turn and hurry away.

“If Knowledge seeks you out,” Danielle said, “it's because she knows where you need to be.”

Humphrey opened the tube and pulled out a map.

“Somewhere south of here,” he said, looking it over.

“Well, good luck,” Danielle said. “I'm going to teleport back to Vitesse.”

“You're not helping?” Humphrey asked.

“There's only so much time I'll willing to spend coddling my son. You can teleport yourself around just fine, so I'm going home. I have my own affairs to take care of.”

Humphrey looked down at the map in his hands.

“This is the middle of nowhere. I can't teleport there.”

“Neither can I,” Danielle said. “You think I've been to every random patch of wilderness and can just teleport wherever?”

“Kind of, yeah,” Sophie said as Humphrey nodded his agreement. Danielle shook her head in exasperation.

“Ask Carlivexistrix to take you,” Danielle told them. “Her territory is to the south and she'll be leaving today.”

Humphrey's eyes went wide.

“Riding a dragon?”

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Humphrey threw out his arms and let out a whooping noise.

“You’re going to fall off,” Sophie yelled so he could hear him over the rushing wind as the dragon underneath them rocketed through the air.

Carli’s true form was that of a vast and majestic dragon, whose scales were not just rainbow colours but shimmered and changed in a magnificent display of beauty. Humphrey and Sophie sat side by side on her broad back without any form of harness, just an oddly grippy blanket Carli had provided them.

“Are you really going to act like this isn’t amazing?” Humphrey yelled.

“It’s just flying, Humphrey.”

He looked at her with a disbelieving expression.

“No one is that jaded,” he told her. “You won’t break if you admit to having some fun, you know.”

He gestured around them at the vast desert panorama expanding in every direction below, with white sand, yellow stone and the winding line of blue and green that marked the river and the narrow strip of fertility it brought.

“It’s alright to admit to enjoying something,” he told her. “It won’t stop people from thinking you’re very tough.”

Underneath them, Carli jerked once then again, leaving Sophie pressed up against a mortified Humphrey.

“Sorry,” Carli’s rumbling dragon voice cut through the wind. “Air pocket.”

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“I don’t see how you aren’t angrier,” Belinda said. “They were holding you prisoner.”

She and Clive were riding a skiff through a desert river canyon that towered over their heads. It was magically propelled but not especially fast. Clive had chosen it at the small village they bought it from because the low magic profile made it harder to track if they were being followed.

“From their cultural perspective,” Clive said, “they were acting within appropriate boundaries.”

“So you think it’s fine?”

“They lied to me, lured us into their territory and kidnapped me,” Clive said. “Of course that’s not acceptable, which is why I escaped. I won’t say I’m not disappointed in the Magic Society, but we can’t blame the whole organisation for the actions of a few.”

“That’s crap,” Belinda said. “The fact that you even think like that is how it keeps happening. After Greenstone and Rakesh, have you ever been to a Magic Society branch that wasn’t shady as shi... what is that?”

Belinda pointed at two figures moving through the air above the canyon. They were both mostly human-shaped, although one had huge wings. She and Clive extended their senses and then both broke out in grins.

“What are they doing here?” Clive asked. “How did they even find us?”

Sophie and Humphrey glided down through the canyon, Humphrey with his wings and Sophie riding the air. She alighted onto the skiff with no more impact than a falling leaf while Humphrey's landing almost tipped Clive over the side.

“What was that?” Sophie demanded after Belinda had righted the boat and Clive had recovered.

“It wasn’t my best landing,” Humphrey sheepishly admitted. “I’m more used to dropping down to attack things.”

“Like Clive,” Sophie said.

“I wasn’t attacking Clive.”

“It looked like you were attacking Clive.”

“I wasn’t attacking Clive!”

Clive and Belinda shared a glance as they watched the pair. With the skiff stabilised, Belinda stood up and snatched Sophie into a warmly returned hug. The last few months was the longest time the pair had been separated since they were children.

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“We’ll lodge protests with the Adventure Society and Magic Society branches when we reach another city,” Clive said. “I’m not going back to Rakesh any time soon.”

“You should,” Sophie said. “We should burn down that Ajus woman’s house.”

“I’m in,” Belinda said. “It’s probably made of stone but there’s magic. We’ll figure it out.”

“No one is burning down anyone’s house,” Humphrey said.

They were in the courtyard of a tavern at a riverside town, deciding on their next move.

“Maybe we could go find Jory,” Sophie said. “Sounds like he could use some help. Neil’s probably with him already.”

“Jory?” Belinda asked, sitting up straight in her chair. “He told me he was going to be giving out lectures, not fighting. He should have let me know.”

“When was the last time you got a letter from him?” Clive asked. “It’s possible Lady Ajus was intercepting our mail.”

“I think we should revisit the burning her house down plan,” Belinda said. “We should take a vote.”

“We keep following the river to the border city of Oleyu,” Clive said. “Until we get there, we’re still in the Rakesh Magic Society branch’s area of influence.”

“There will be a temple of the Healer there,” Humphrey said. “We can find out more about Jory’s situation from them.”

\*\*\*

The city of Oleyu was unremarkable. It wasn’t as big and important as Rakesh or Vitesse, or unusual like Greenstone. It was a pleasant, prosperous and moderately sized city built on river trade, with a mid-range level of magic.

Clive, flanked by Sophie and Humphrey, was in the Magic Society building lodging a protest over his treatment by the Rakesh branch. He wasn’t optimistic about results as the Rakesh branch was one of the most powerful on the continent. Any official with authority stationed there had power and connections, so any consequences they faced would come from the Adventure Society, rather than other Magic Society branches.

The Adventure Society didn’t take kindly to its members being exploited, but for a bronze-ranker like Clive, it would take time before his complaint was given attention. As the monster surge precursor signs grew worse and the Builder cult remained a threat, inter-organisational conflict was a low priority.

Belinda, meanwhile, was contacting Jory through a water link chamber. Communicating through watery clones was the most accessible form of long-distance communication and a major use for the magical stone that Greenstone exported. The green stone of the chamber Belinda was led into was a reminder of home.

She stood on a small platform in front of a water pool and waited. It took a few minutes before the water flowed up into the shape of a person. The water took on colour until a somewhat wobbly replica of Jory stood before her, the blank expression turning into a grin as the connection was formed.

“Lindy!”

She smiled at him, about to answer but he started babbling.

“I was so relieved when I heard you were alright. After you didn’t respond to my last letter I tried contacting you but the Magic Society said that you were on some job with Clive and couldn’t be contacted. I kept trying to get in touch but they stopped listening to me altogether. I was about to try contacting Emir Bahadir to see if he could help but –”

“You do realise this chamber lets both of us talk?” she interrupted. Jory let out a sheepish laugh.

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After regrouping in the private dining room of a high-end tavern, Belinda explained Jory’s situation to the others.

“Jory isn’t doing anything dangerous,” she said. “He’ll just be in some isolated rural areas where his guards will need to handle monsters they come across. The areas are all low magic, so he should be fine. Mostly bronze and silver-rank monsters.”

“That might not be the case if these monster surge precursors keep getting worse,” Humphrey said. “Joining him might not be a bad idea.”

“I’m not against it,” Belinda said, “but I think it would be better off with only me joining Jory and Neil.”

“We just met up,” Sophie said. “You want to run off again straight away?”

“You’ll get bored senseless playing guard duty, Soph, and you know it’s good that you haven’t had many chances in life to get bored. You know what happens.”

“You’re blowing things out of proportion,” Sophie said.

“Am I? Remember Charles and the moss cat?”

“How was I meant to know it wouldn’t grow back?” Sophie asked.

“It was growing off of a cat, Soph. It very obviously wasn’t a real tomato.”

“It wasn’t a real cat!”

“I believe Belinda’s point,” Clive said, “is that she thinks you’ll do better working with me.”

“On what?” Humphrey asked.

“I’ve been working on something that might help us catch the Builder cult by the tail,” Clive said. “I’ve managed to tap into the portal network that the Builder cult has been using to move around.”

“That’s amazing,” Humphrey said. “That will be a huge weapon against the Builder.”

“If I can use the information the way I think I can,” Clive said. “Every request I made to do reconnaissance and field testing was denied. I eventually realised that the Rakesh Magic Society wasn’t interested in the fight against the Builder. All they want is access to the cult’s advanced astral magic, which is what they really recruited me for.”

“The Adventure Society will take a very different view,” Humphrey said.

“Yes,” Clive agreed, “but after Rakesh, I’m not willing to take that on faith. They might dismiss me as just some bronze-ranker from a provincial city. I want to walk into the Magic Society with everything on a plate, so they can’t push it aside.”

“Will we get to kick the crap out of some cultists?” Sophie asked.

“She means will we *have to* fight any cultists,” Humphrey corrected.

“If everything goes right, then no,” Clive said. Then an uncharacteristically malevolent grin crossed his face. “And what could possibly go wrong?”

## Chapter 460

### Kind of His Thing

Clive drove the flying, open-top carriage through the skies of Vitesse, docking halfway up one of the garden towers covered in flowers and greenery. He disembarked onto a balcony, along with Humphrey and Sophie, where they were met by an Adventure Society attendant.

"Young Master Geller, Mr Standish, Miss Wexler," he greeted. "Welcome back to the city, and congratulations on reaching silver rank."

"Thank you, Ernest," Clive said, handing over the control crystal for the carriage. "Do you know where we're meant to go?"

"I believe Mr Cotezee is waiting for you."

"Thank you, Ernest."

The trio made their way through the Adventure Society building to Miles Cotezee's office. He was a senior administrator, his silver rank coming entirely from cores. His paper, knowledge, rune and scribe essence combination was more suited to battling bureaucracy than monsters. They found the man in his office behind a desk piled high with papers in a series of trays. He looked up as they entered, his sudden grin looking especially manic on his frazzled expression.

"Clive! And friends, obviously. How did we do?"

Miles stumbled out of his chair and hurried around the table as Clive gave him a wary look. The man looked like he was ready to snap if he got bad news.

"Success," Clive said. "You can set up a presentation."

"Already did," Miles said. "It's in..."

He fished a watch from his pocket to check the time.

"...a little over three hours. You should take some time to have some lunch and relax beforehand."

"You might want to join us," Sophie suggested. "You look like you could use a break."

Miles let out a mad cackle.

"Break? That's a precious dream. Just be back here in two and a half hours. Oh, and wear your guild pins. It'll lend a little authority to what you have to say."

"What do we need more authority for?" Sophie asked. "Clive cracked the cult's portal network; how much more respect does he need to earn before people listen to him?"

"However you look at it, you're freshly minted silver-rankers," Miles said. "I love you kids, I really do, but you're not in Greenstone anymore. If you want people to listen to you



in this town, power is king. If you don't get it from your rank, get it from your name, your guild or wherever you can."

Miles frowned, remembering something.

"Where's your familiar?" he asked Humphrey.

Humphrey held open his jacket to reveal the head and paws of a mouse sticking out of the lining pocket.

"G'day bloke," the mouse said.

Humphrey shook his head and closed his jacket. The trio left Miles' office and made their way to one of the tower's many open balconies. Magical energy emerged from the rune tattoo on Clive's chest, passed through the cloth of his robe and coalesced into a tortoise the size of a sport utility vehicle, floating in the air beside the balcony. The tortoise's gently curved shell was covered in brightly glowing runes in a cornucopia of colours.

This was Clive's rune tortoise familiar, Onslow. The trio stepped off the balcony and onto his shell, at which point the familiar started descending through the air. They alighted in a public park where they hopped down from Onslow's back. Clive fed him a lettuce leaf while scratching the back of his head.

Clive was about to return Onslow to the tattoo when he spotted some children pointing. The rune tortoise was a non-threatening figure, despite its size, and covered in colourful, glowing runes that made him popular with children. Humphrey and Sophie shared a knowing look.

"We'll get you something to eat and come back," Sophie told Clive, patting him on the shoulder.

When they returned with a basket of sandwiches and drinks, Sophie and Humphrey found a gaggle of children riding Onslow around as he slowly floated around the park, just above the ground. Their parents were all gathered around Clive. In these situations, Sophie and Humphrey used to play a game where they guessed which ones were single mothers based on their body language but it had become far too easy to tell. Sophie pulled out a recording crystal and tossed it into the air where it floated over her head.

"What are you doing?" Humphrey asked.

"I thought Lorelei might like to see this," Sophie said innocently.

"You are just trouble, head to toe," Humphrey told her.

Eventually, Clive noticed them and dismissed Onslow, the families going on their way. The trio sat on a blanket and enjoyed lunch, although they still had time to spare

when they were done. They decided to walk a roundabout path back to the Adventure Society tower rather than fly. Teleporting into the tower wasn't possible.

On their way back, they saw a priest in full regalia robes sprinting down the street like monsters were chasing him. Sophie and Clive looked around and saw that no one seemed to be paying him any attention.

"Does that guy need help?" Clive asked.

"No," Humphrey said. "He's a priest of Lust. I bet there's a..."

He trailed off as a priestess, also in elaborate robes came running around a corner in pursuit of the priest.

"Come back!" she yelled after him. "I'll help you with your ritual!"

"BEGONE, WOMAN!" the priest yelled back over his shoulder.

"Is that...?" Clive asked.

"A priestess of Fertility, yes," Humphrey confirmed.

"This is a fun city," Sophie said.

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Riding one of the elevating platforms up through the tower Sophie, Humphrey and Clive took out their guild pins, affixing them to their clothes. Each one depicted violet flames in the shape of a flower. The shimmer of the magical material from which they were made gave the impression of dancing purple fire.

The building seemed oddly busy, even for the Adventure Society. As they made their way to Miles' office they saw people rushing frenetically through the halls. In his office, Miles was somehow even more agitated than he had been just hours before. He was standing over his desk running his hands through his hair as he looked at the papers in front of him like they'd slept with his wife. As the trio came in he looked up at them, wild-eyed.

"What is it?" Humphrey asked.

"Is there a problem with the presentation?" Clive followed up.

"Presentation's cancelled," Miles said.

"Cancelled?" Humphrey asked. "We've been scouting out that dam for two months. Clive finally figured out what—"

"Doesn't matter right now," Miles said, moving around the table to close the door.

"Something big is going on. I'm not sure what exactly, but rumour is that the monster surge is finally about to start."

"And these rumours spread since we got here three hours ago?" Sophie asked.

"The high-ups are keeping their cards close right now, but yeah," Miles said. "From what I've heard, there's some undisclosed source of information that says the surge is going to begin within the next few months."

"People have been saying that for years now," Sophie said.

"Yet none of those people triggered what's going on now," Miles said. "The Adventure Society has had the Magic Society cancel every booking on the water link chambers and all but taken them over. Almost all activities are being cancelled or rescheduled and orders are going out everywhere. Including for you three."

"The Adventure Society doesn't give orders," Sophie said. "It gives contracts."

"The society is going into monster surge rules, Miss Wexler. Try turning down a directly issued contract today and see where that gets you."

"What's the contract?" Humphrey asked.

"All three of you need to travel to some small town on the far side of nowhere," Miles told them, turning to search through the unruly papers covering his desk.

"And then what?" Sophie asked.

"No idea," Miles said. "The contract just says to go there. All three of you. That's the entire directive."

He found what he was looking for, handing them a sheet of paper each with what little details there were.

"This is a nothing contract," Sophie says. "It just says head off to some little village."

"I don't know any more than you do," Miles said, "except for one thing. This contract didn't come down through normal channels. It came down from on high, and I mean proper high. The kind of people your mother couldn't get in to see, Mr Geller. People who shouldn't even know who any of you are. So I strongly recommend you take the contract and do exactly what it says without making a fuss."

"Why is everyone looking at me?" Sophie asked.

"What about the dam project?" Clive asked. "If I gave someone else the details, maybe they could take over."

"Take over?" Sophie said, wheeling on Clive. "After all the work we put in? This is your win, Clive."

"As long as the work gets done," Humphrey said, "it doesn't matter who does it."

"Yes it does," Miles said. "Miss Wexler is quite right to be concerned. Reputation is everything in this town. I know you're very enthused about the civic responsibility of adventurers, Mr Geller, but there's only so much good you can do if no one takes you

seriously. If you want to fight the good fight, and I know you do, then you need to step out of your mother's shadow to be taken seriously in your own right."

"Which is exactly what I meant," Sophie said. "Also, I'm not letting some random person take all the credit."

"Tell us about this village they're sending us to," Clive said. "What makes it special?"

"No idea," Miles said. "My very strong suggestion is to go there and find out. There has to be something there. Oh, and someone will be going with you. He's being portalled in as we speak."

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A small town on the far side of nowhere was having a celebration feast inside their new, reinforced walls. As evening fell, a trio of visitors arrived in search of a blacksmith. Jory, Belinda and Neil were startled to discover that the blacksmith was someone they knew.

They hadn't seen Gary in two years, since Jason's memorial. The previously crestfallen leonid had regained his boisterousness, gathering all three of them into a bone-crushing hug before dragging them all off to the feast.

"What are you even doing here?" Gary mumbled through roasted meat. He had bitten it from a whole leg he was waving around that was the size of Belinda's arm.

"I'm out here trying to figure out how to make cheap potions with the local materials," Jory said. "I should be teaching people how to do it for themselves but that's a process that takes time we don't have right now. What about you?"

"Same thing, but for weapons, armour and fortifications," Gary said.

"A strange lady told me there was a blacksmith that could meet our needs here," Jory said. "Belinda needs a full refresh of her gear."

"Strange lady?" Gary asked. "Strange how?"

"She was too high rank to be out here," Jory said. "Even though I couldn't sense her aura, I could tell. Her clothes and the way she carried herself. A celestine, with hair like rubies."

"Are you sure it wasn't a man?" Gary asked. "I haven't seen a woman like you're describing, but there's a guy roaming about making trouble."

"Unless it was disguise magic, I'm sure," Jory said. "I figured she must have been sent out here because a gold-rank monster manifested."

"Makes sense," Gary said, then tore off another meat strip with his teeth. With his huge head and leonine features, it was somewhat terrifying to watch.

"I haven't heard about any gold-rank monster, though," Gary said, still spraying slivers of meat as he turned to Belinda. "So you need a set of silver-rank gear? I was set to pack up and move on tomorrow, but I can take a day."

"I need a lot of gear," Belinda said. "A lot. A day might not be enough."

"Don't underestimate your friend, here," a smooth voice said. An immaculately groomed man in out-of-place city fashion sat down next to Gary. "His skills have advanced in leaps and bounds in the last year or so."

"This would be the guy roaming around making trouble," Gary introduced. "Virid, these are my friends. "Belinda, Neil and Jory, this is Virid."

"A pleasure," Virid said. "I'm also curious about this unusual woman you mentioned. I didn't feel anyone like what you're describing and my senses are... quite prodigious."

The three looked over Virid, just as alien to the remote town as the woman Jory described.

"What is going on out here?" Neil wondered aloud.

"Good question," Rufus asked. "What are you all doing here?"

Everyone at the table turned to face the new arrival and Gary leapt up, clasping Rufus in a huge hairy hug, the meat in Gary's hand getting oil down Rufus' back.

"I seem to recall you not being a hugger," Rufus gasped.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Gary said with a laugh. "What are you doing here?"

"Adventure Society sent me," Rufus said. "They came to the training annex, told where to go with nothing about why and portalled me halfway around the world. The others are still caught up at the town entry checkpoint."

"Others?" Gary asked, as arguing voices drifted in their direction, loud enough to be heard over the ongoing feat.

"You were lucky I was able to talk them down," Humphrey said. "All you needed was a little patience."

"How was I meant to know they wouldn't take a bribe?" Sophie complained. "Since when do village guards have integrity?"

"Small town people are good and decent folk," Humphrey said. "They deserve our respect."

"And city people don't?" Sophie demanded.

"In fairness, Sophie," Clive interjected, "would you trust you?"

"That's not a terrible point," Sophie admitted. "Lindy?"

Belinda rushed to catch her friend in a hug.

“What is everyone doing here?” Clive asked.

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Jason’s old team, plus Rufus, Gary and Gary’s mentor Virid were gathered at a picnic table left from the previous night’s feast. They were discussing how they all ended up in the same place at the same time, in the middle of nowhere.

“The only clue we have to what brought us all here is this mysterious woman?” Rufus asked. “Why us? Why here and why now?”

“Aside from Gary’s new friend,” Clive said, “there is something that connects us. Greenstone.”

“And the person we all met there,” Sophie added.

“The location may be a matter of discretion,” Virid suggested as the other fell into a sombre silence. “Large cities have eyes and ears that even I can’t escape, while the arrival of someone like me in a small one becomes fast news. Here, there is no one to tell.”

“Quite astute,” a female voice said. The group turned to see a celestine with alabaster skin, her crimson eyes and hair shining in the morning sun. They stood up arraying themselves in front of her. Virid was wary, not sensing her aura. He pushed out with his senses, turning whiter than she was at what he found.

“I’m, uh... I’m going to go,” he said.

“No,” Dawn told him. “You’re not. Sit back down.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Gary watched the terrified Virid with shock, being the only one who knew that he was a diamond ranker. What did that make this woman? She looked Virid up and down.

“You don’t look it,” she told him, “but you’re a smith?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Mr Xandier’s skills may not be quite where I need them, so collaborating with you may bridge that gap.”

“I don’t suppose you’d care to explain why you brought us all here?” Rufus asked, stepping to the fore.

“I need Mr Xandier to reforge a weapon for me,” she said.

“The rest of us aren’t smiths,” Rufus said. “What do you want?”

“To fulfil a promise,” she said. She took a weapon from the dimensional bag at her waist and held it out. Gary moved forward and took it, turning it over in his hands.

The sword was bent almost in half. The craftsmanship was familiar, yet alien.

“What did this?” Gary asked. “How did the blade not snap?”

Gary's examination went deeper than simply looking. His forge essence abilities gave him insights into the nature of worked metals.

"It's soul-bonded," he said. "The sword bends but doesn't break, because so does the owner."

He looked up at Dawn.

"Which isn't you."

"No. I promised the owner I would have it ready and waiting when he arrived and only one man can reforge it."

"This feels like my work," Gary said, "but I don't remember this sword."

"It's been modified," Dawn said. "It wasn't soul-bonded when you made it, and it was ranked-up, being a growth item. Look again."

Gary looked back down at the sword in his hands, pushing his senses to the limit. Finally, he recognised it and his eyes went wide. His face came up filled with fury and he let out a roar that cracked the stone wall of the smithy next to him. Dawn's hair and clothes whipped around her like she was standing in a hurricane, but she didn't so much as lean back. The friends behind Gary covered their ears, deafened despite not being in the direct blast.

"Why do you have this?" Gary demanded, marching up into Dawn's face and waving the sword in front of her. "How do you have it?"

"I told you," she said calmly. "I promised the owner I would have it waiting for him."

"I don't know who soul-bonded this weapon," Gary growled, "but the real owner is dead. So you'd best tell me who gave you this or you're going to join him. I don't care who or what you are. I'll find a way."

"Gary, no!" Virid warned, standing up.

"Sit," Dawn barked and he plopped back down.

"The owner died, yes," she said. "But as it turns out, coming back from the dead is kind of his thing."