

## 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.

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- You have entered an extremely abnormal space.
  - This space operates according to an abnormal magical paradigm. Essence abilities will not take effect.
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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.
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“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.

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- **Zone: Genesis seed (reimplemented).**
  - **Warning: this location does not fully exist.**
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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.