

## 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.

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- 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].

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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.”