

## 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."

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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.

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Jason was standing outside the pagoda’s front doors.

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- 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 Core]. Would you like to expand your spirit domain?
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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.

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- 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%.
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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.

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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.

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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—"

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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.”

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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.