

## 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.

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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.

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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."*

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#### 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.
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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.

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- 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.
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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.

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- 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?
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“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.

\*\*\*

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.

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- 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.

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➤ 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.”

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- 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.
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“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.”

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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.

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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 ghoul 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 ghoul."

“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.”

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When the Necromancer finally agreed, it surrendered not just the contested space but his entire domain.

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- 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.”