

Chapter 401

It's Okay to Laugh

Jason, Dawn and Farrah looked at the burned, drained remains of the vampire lord Willoughby.

"I still don't like the risk you took draining him," Farrah said. "Now that it's done, though, at least one of us has a path to advancement."

Since reaching silver-rank, Jason and Farrah had both reached the limits of their early-stage growth spurt. Pushing into the mid and late stages of silver rank would be difficult so long as they remained on Earth. At lower ranks, confronting higher-rank monsters was a path to rapid advancement that Jason especially had taken advantage of, but that was less viable at silver.

Gold rank monsters were too powerful to casually confront, even for elite essence users. More well-rounded and with fewer exploitable weaknesses, many were even more dangerous than less-competent essence users of equivalent rank. Without a solid team of elites, going after gold-rank monsters was too risky.

The traditional path to gold involved confronting many silver-rank monsters, ideally those who could pose a greater challenge than average. Gold-rank proto-spaces could offer silver-rank monsters in large numbers and had started to sporadically appear, but not often enough.

Jason and Farrah would need to monopolise those spaces, which they didn't have time for, even if they didn't have to compete with the Network's strongest forces. After Makassar, even the fight over reality cores wasn't enough to distract the Network from descending on any gold-rank space with enough magically enhanced heavy ordnance to level a small town.

For these reasons, Jason and Farrah had given up on growing their power further until they returned to Farrah's world. The revelation that Jason could advance by treating vampires as monster cores gave Jason, at least, a means of advancement.

The biggest advantage of monster core advancement was that cores could be absorbed in larger quantities and slowly processed, compared to the constant need to seek out dangerous conflict. If Jason really could treat vampires like monster cores, then periodically hunting a few vampires before returning to the task at hand could pay off in half a year or so when his abilities grew stronger. Just ten or twenty percent further into silver rank would be a welcome jump in strength.

That did not mean they were about to go off looking for every vampire they could. Dawn and Farrah's victory was hard-fought, even with Dawn's diamond-rank experience and peak silver-rank power. They had the advantage of numbers and a lot of fire abilities, while the vampire's powers played little part. Other vampires would be stronger, which would make a hard fight even with the addition of Jason.

"We shouldn't go out of our way looking for vampires," Jason said. "We have our objective and I have a feeling that we'll be running into them one way or another."

"Agreed," Dawn said. "I believe that future encounters are inevitable, if only because we are unwilling to conscience their behaviour."

"Mr Asano," Shade said, one of his bodies emerging from Jason's shadow.

"Yes?" Jason asked.

"The ritual effect in the palace has ended," Shade said. "They're gone."

Jason bowed his head, his lips pressed tightly together. After a moment, he nodded. The only three bodies of Shade's that Jason hadn't brought into battle were the ones being possessed by Kaito, Asya and Greg.

"Thank you, Shade. And thank your dad, when you get the chance."

"The Reaper will not care," Shade said.

"I'd appreciate you doing it anyway."

Koen Waters, Annabeth Tilden and a tactical team were standing on the eighth floor of the Network building, standing next to a neatly circular hole in the floor, some two metres across. It descended through the building, all the way down to the lobby.

"What do we do about the hole?" Koen asked.

"For now," Anna said, "we hope it didn't take out anything structurally necessary."

Anna's presence was the main reason for the security team since the ghouls had been eliminated and the surviving Cabal members had fled. A handful of ethereal blue and orange butterflies drifted up from the hole before dropping back down. They were overtly magical, with a glow to their vibrant colouration. There had previously been far more of the butterflies swarming the floors and reducing the ghouls to drained husks that were now scattered all through the building.

"How many dead?" Anna asked.

"We've only done eyeball estimates but we're looking at maybe two-hundred. Maybe more."

"That many?"

“We had a lot of staff on-site with the extra shifts we’ve been running,” Koen said. “We managed to evacuate a lot of them upstairs but then there were the police and military. The Cabal killed quite a lot of them before they all pulled back, and the vampire animated them all.”

“Do we know where the vampire is? Or Asano? I’m assuming one killed the other.”

“We think they fought on the third floor. Asano was brief when we encountered him and he told us about recovering our people and hiding them. The fight seems to be over because we can’t feel either aura, so I’ve sent a section to check it out.”

“How are we doing on getting those people back?”

“Our sweeper teams have found them and are bringing them up as we speak.”

“Good,” Anna said. “After what happened, we need to subject them to every medical test and magical healing known to humankind.”

Koen’s second-in-command, Manesh, was watching the hole and spoke up.

“Ditto, we have movement.”

Koen went to look over the edge of the hole and then took several steps back as a dark figure swept up through the hole and landed in front of him. Jason arrived on dark wings, Dawn and Farrah quickly following with their wings of flame.

“G’day, Koen, Anna,” Jason greeted as he pushed the hood of his cloak back. “Did you find all your people?”

“You beat the vampire?”

“No, the ladies were the stars of that show while I played ghoulish janitor. Did you find your people I stashed away?”

“We’re bringing them back now,” Koen said. “Thank you for stepping in, especially after how our organisation has treated you.”

“No worries.”

“Thank you,” Anna echoed while looking curiously at Dawn.

“Last time I saw you,” Anna told her, “you were normal rank.”

“Coming back from the dead more powerful than ever is kind of our thing,” Jason said. “How are you going to respond to the Cabal’s attack?”

Anna glowered.

“We lost a lot of people,” she said. “Your intervention prevented the loss of many critical personnel, so our ability to respond to proto-spaces is undiminished. Step one is to recover any isolated survivors while making sure we can still do our job. Protecting the country from proto-spaces and preventing monster waves is the first priority.”

Jason nodded his approval.

"What we've lost," Anna continued, "is a huge portion of the administrative staff that allows an organisation as large as ours to function. A lot of our people died today and step two is counting the dead and securing our magical infrastructure. Also making sure that the hole in the middle of our building won't cause it to collapse."

"Maybe we can look at it as an opportunity," Koen's second, Manesh said.

"What do mean?" Anna asked.

"You could install an epic fireman's pole."

"Manesh, a lot of people just died," Anna said.

"Seriously, mate," Jason said. "I love a fireman's pole as much as the next bloke, but time and place."

"This coming from you," Farrah said.

"So, what's step three?" Jason asked Anna, forcibly changing the subject.

"After we make sure we're operational, it's time to clean house properly. I'm going to dissolve the steering committee and take charge personally."

"You can do that?" Farrah asked.

"She has the support of the tactical department," Koen said.

"Getting blindsided like this shouldn't have happened," Anna said. "It would take someone at the steering committee level to poke just the right holes in our security net without being noticed. We've been worried about the committee for a while, with some throwing in with the leadership faction and now others selling us out to the Cabal. The International Committee has already fractured, take in those local IC people who went against the leadership and restructure."

"That's bold," Farrah said."

"We're also going to work with some of the Cabal that split off because they don't want to work with the old vampires," Anna said. "Craig Vermillion is running his own splinter faction. Between us, him and the EOA members that left, back when they realised their group caused the monster waves, we're talking about a whole new group, with members from every major magical faction."

"That's oddly optimistic, in the middle of all this mess," Jason said. "Are there any more old vampires in Australia?"

"No," Koen said. "He came over with the earliest colonial forces. My family has been part of what is now the Network since long before they arrived. I have family records of his being a menace until he grew too strong and went into hibernation."

Koen Waters was an Aboriginal Australian. Jason was startled to hear that the network predated colonisation and curious as to how that worked given Australia's history of violence and oppression to the indigenous population, but it was far from the time.

"Our contacts in the parts of the Cabal not on team ancient vampire confirm that this vampire was the only one in Australia," Anna said. "We're low priority compared to Asia and North America, but Europe has the strongest concentration, though. The southern hemisphere is mostly free of them, with the biggest concentration in South America."

"Small mercies," Jason said. "How are you going to respond to the Cabal?"

"It's too early to say," Anna said. "They declared war today and hitting hard while they're on the back foot has emotional appeal, but as I said, our priority has to be preventing monster waves."

"The transformation events are bad enough," Koen said.

"We're certainly going to stop fighting over reality cores, now," Anna said. "I suspect the Cabal will too, at least for the immediacy. The EOA have been the poor cousins in that fight but it looks like the door may be open for them now, at least for a while."

"Great," Jason said. "They're using the cores to create boost injections, allowing their superheroes to juice up to gold-rank temporarily."

"We know," Anna said. "We all saw your encounter with the EOA in Venezuela."

"You killed them with your brain," Manesh said. "It was scary as shi—"

He stopped talking at a glare from Koen.

"So, what about you?" Anna asked. "You never used that information I gave you."

"Too much risk," Jason said. "Too many variables. That's why no one else was willing to take a shot, right?"

"We thought you might be willing to try."

"I almost did," Jason said. "You gave it to me at my brother's funeral. Made me feel like I have to or I'm letting him down. Kind of a prick move."

"I'm sorry," Anna said.

"No you're not," Jason said. "I don't have to read your emotions to know that, although I can. It's time for us to go."

"Wait," Anna said. "I think Vermillion will want to contact you, once he knows you're in the country," Anna said. "Are you still using a phone or did you ditch it?"

"I've still got my phone," Jason said. "The anti-tracking magic makes the roaming charges worse, somehow, but I still have about five million bucks left. I sank most of the cash from that gold you helped me flog off into building Asano village but I stopped paying attention to money a while back."

Anna took a notepad and pen from her jacket, scribbled a number down, tore out the page and handed it to Jason.

“Vermillion’s burner.”

“Thanks.”

A portal opened on the tower rooftop at the centre of Jason’s cloud palace. Jason, Farrah and Dawn stepped through and Jason wandered to the balustrade, looking out over the ocean.

“They’re gone,” he said as Farrah moved up beside him.

“Yeah,” Farrah said. “You alright?”

“I am,” he said. “I’m kind of annoyed that they used their final message to the living to tell me to get over myself.”

Jason and Farrah shared a look and started laughing.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I feel lighter, somehow. Getting to say goodbye. Maybe it’s okay to laugh when you can, even in the dark days.”

“I think that might be when it’s most important,” Farrah said.

Jason went and found all the people he had brought to his cloud palace, left somewhat at a loss by his departure. Some had gone off to explore the palace, although most remained in the hall where the ritual had been conducted. He rounded everyone up and then portalled them back to Asano Village before putting the cloud palace back in its flask.

The families of Greg and Asya were no longer as contentious towards Jason. That wasn’t the same as forgiveness but they’d been admonished by their dead loved ones and saw the magnitude of Jason’s resources. It was one thing to see him on the news and another to experience it for themselves. Between the portal, the cloud palace and the ability to call up the dead, they realised that some fights weren’t worth picking.

Once all the people were sent home, Jason wanted to leave before his presence called trouble down on Asano Village. Before that, though, he called Vermillion on the number Anna gave him.

“Oh, hey,” Vermillion said, sounding distracted. Jason could hear the roar of a car engine in the background.

“You sound busy,” Jason said.

“Little bit,” Craig said. “Didn’t want to miss you, though.”

“Anna gave me your number. Said you might want to hear from me.”

“Definitely.”

The sound of gunfire came through the phone.

“You aren’t playing a video game, are you?” Jason asked.

“Uh, no, I’m not,” Craig said. “I don’t suppose you’re anywhere near Sydney?”

Chapter 402

Dignified Moment

"This is not going to plan, Craig," Franklin said, sitting in the front passenger seat as Vermillion was driving.

"You think?" Vermillion asked wildly as he kicked off what was left of the bullet-riddled, driver-side door.

The streets of Bankstown had been transformed into a realm of stone and fire. The buildings were made from large bricks in dark shades of brown, red and grey. The cars parked on the street had been turned into stone carriages that a team of horses would be hard-pressed to budge. The car Vermillion was driving, along with the ones chasing it, had been brought in from the outside.

The streets they drove on, oddly, were still flat asphalt. Due to Bankstown being abandoned by all but the Cabal, this allowed for the cars to take a breakneck pace as they belted through the streets.

"Bryan, did you find that stuff?" Vermillion asked.

"Come on, Vermillion," complained the vampire in the back seat.

"Seriously, Bryan? This is not the time!"

"But it's never the time, is it?" Bryan complained. Vermillion was about to fire back a retort when a fresh stream of bullets pierced through the car, one of which hit him in the back of the head.

"Damn it, Bryan."

Bryan didn't say anything.

"Bryan!"

"You already have a cool vampire name," Bryan complained.

"I don't have a cool vampire name, Bryan. It's just my surname."

"Well, my surname is Slansky. No one is going to fear Slansky the vampire."

"My name's Frank."

"And nobody fears you, Frank."

"Oh, you might be surprised," Vermillion said.

"Why would I want to be feared?" Frank asked. "Have you ever tried to find four for a bridge game when everyone thinks you're going to eat them?"

An arrow shot through the gap where the back window used to be, buried itself in Vermillion's shoulder and then exploded, blasting the headrest from his seat and leaving

his arm dangling from a strip of flesh. Blood spilled out, but instead of falling away, it transformed into flesh, restoring the massive wound in moments.

“God damn it, Bryan,” Vermillion yelled. “Give me the damn stuff.”

“I’m not responding to that name.”

“Are you...”

Craig bit back his words.

“Night Stalker,” he said through gritted teeth. “Can you please give Frank the stuff?”

“Of course, Vermillion,” Bryan said, holding out a crude ball of what looked and felt like putty. “All you had to do was ask.”

There was a thump as the roof bent inward under weight and a pair of huge, taloned claws pierced the roof as some manner of creature landed on it. Frank reached down by his feet and retrieved a sawn-off, double-barrel shotgun with glowing runes carved into the barrels. He casually pointed it at the roof and pulled both triggers, blasting most of the roof off. With a horrific screech, the gargoyle-like creature that had been on it flew off with its long, leathery wings.

“Where did you get that?” Vermillion asked.

“One of those Network guys at the storage facility,” Frank said. “Anyway, you’re the one that stole their car. Maybe that’s why those Network guys are chasing us so hard.”

One of the reasons the car had held up under repeated magical attacks was that of all the cars they could have stolen for the getaway, they found and took the only magical one.

“What were Network people even doing there?” Bryan asked. “Shouldn’t they be defending their headquarters right now?”

“I don’t think those are Network people anymore,” Vermillion said. “The Network is fractured as badly as us, maybe even worse. I’d heard talk of the higher-ups trying to recruit essence magicians but I didn’t think they’d have gotten anyone this strong. Are you still holding onto the stuff? Give it to Frank.”

“What do you want putty for anyway?” Bryan asked, holding out the ball again.

“Frank’s bloodline lets him absorb materials and pass their properties onto his blood,” Vermillion explained.

“Why would you want your blood to be like putty?” Bryan asked.

Frank bit his finger, drawing blood that flowed out of the wound and over the ball in his hand, which was swiftly melted down and absorbed, even the spilled blood crawling back into his skin. Frank then bit his finger right off before plucking it from his mouth and

tossing it out the window. When one of the pursuing cars drove over it, an explosion underneath sent the car rolling out of the chase. Franks finger quickly grew back.

“You really thought that was putty, Bryan?” Vermillion asked.

“Night Stalker!”

“Night Stalker doesn’t even sound like a vampire name,” Vermillion said. “It sounds like a rapist from the eighties.”

“But not an actual rapist,” Frank said. “More like a rapist from one of those daytime TV movies where a housewife learns that handsome men are all terrible.”

“You can both go fu—”

He was cut off when Vermillion swerved hard and Night Stalker’s head smashed the car’s last intact window.

“Sorry,” Vermillion said. “That pothole had lava in it.”

Jason, Dawn and Farrah stepped out of a portal near the border of Bankstown. Jason hadn’t been able to send them to a familiar location like the airport because there were no familiar locations left. Bankstown had been transformed both physically and magically, down to the smallest particle.

“I think this is the right street,” Jason said, extending his senses. Dawn did the same while Farrah rolled her shoulders, shifting her body. She was still appreciating that she no longer suffered disorientation from teleportation after gaining the astral affinity of an outworlder.

“There they are,” Jason said. “Oh, crikey.”

Jason sensed a large number of magical auras moving at speed, along with a lot of overt magic being thrown around.

“Are those magic guns I’m sensing being used?” Jason asked.

“I believe they are,” Dawn said.

“He must have some Network people chasing him,” Jason, tilting his head as if trying to hear a distant sound more clearly. “Yeah, those are essence abilities going off. Silver rank, damn. Who did Craig get cranky?”

“Maybe we should go find out,” Farrah suggested.

“Right, yes,” Jason said. “Shade, if you would?”

Five Shade bodies appeared from Jason's shadow and merged together, taking on the form of a huge, four-seater car. It had sleek, hypercar lines and a smattering of glowing white embellishments on what was, of course, a glossy black body.

“Okay, I’m going to get sued,” Jason said. “This is a straight-up Batmobile.”

"I could add non-trademarked badging," Shade offered, "but you would need a simple and elegant logo. Your personal crest does not translate into a clean, easily iconic symbol."

"Are you saying I need a superhero emblem?" Jason asked.

"It would help," Shade said.

"Can we please go?" Dawn asked. "We need to go catch up with them."

"Good point," Jason said, peering at the car. "Which part is the door?"

"Where exactly are we going?" Frank asked as the careening chase continued.

"Away," Vermillion said, swerving the car around a corner as they rushed through Bankstown's empty streets.

"I don't like 'away' being the most solid plan we have," Frank said.

An explosion to the right of the car tore up asphalt.

"You may have missed it, Frank, but even just 'away' is turning out to be a high bar."

"We don't even have the blood and cores, though," Night Stalker said. "We're the decoy car."

"They don't know that," Vermillion said. "Do you not understand what a decoy is?"

The gargoyle-like creature swept down once more but was met with a bloody mist that Night Stalker spat out and it backed off. Vermillion was about to turn the car hard into another corner when he was startled by something popping up in the middle of his eyeline.

"What the hell?"

➤ You have received a party invitation from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

Vermillion moved his head to look around the obstruction but it kept moving to the middle of his view and he almost ran the car into a stone carriage parked on the side of the road.

"What are you doing?" Frank asked.

"Yes, god damn it," Vermillion yelled.

"Yes, what?" Frank asked.

Missing the corner and then almost crashing had allowed the cars pursuing them to close in. Frank and Night Stalker were gearing up to fend off fresh attacks when a series of what looked like orange lasers started laying into the other vehicles, slicing them up like pieces of cake.

"What's doing that?" Frank asked.

Watching out the back window, Night Stalker saw the source of the attacks.

"It looks like a space cloud on top of the Batmobile shooting lasers."

The lack of cars didn't entirely end the pursuit as the most powerful Cabal members and essence users who had been in the cars gave chase on foot, moving at speeds comparable to a car. There was also the large gargoyle creature still flying after them.

Gordon made short work of the non-magical cars, although the people inside proved more resilient as they sprung from the wreckage to continue pursuing Vermillion's car.

"I'm surprised Craig's car is still running," Jason said. "It must be one of the Network's magically-enhanced ones, right?"

"I imagine so," Farrah said.

Vermillion's car was a wreck on wheels, missing two of the doors and most of the roof, the rest riddled with damage. The fact that all four wheels were intact was too much of a miracle to be anything but magic.

Jason and Dawn both snapped their heads to the left at the same time.

"That may be trouble," Dawn said.

"I'll deal with it," Jason said. "You two make sure our enthusiastic joggers don't run down his car. He almost crashed back there, so I'm not sure he's the best driver."

Farrah strained her senses and picked up what the others had already sensed.

"A conjured Vehicle. Vermillion isn't the only one bringing in reinforcements."

Vehicle specialists were more common on Earth than Farrah's world. Many were flyers like Kaito and his helicopter, but land-based vehicles were much more the norm, trading off the capability to fly for an increase in combat power. The common thread for vehicle specialists was that their vehicle-based powers were awkward to use but proportionally more powerful than more convenient power sets.

Australia didn't have a lot of vehicle users, compared to China who boasted a higher percentage of them than any other major nation. Combined with China's population, this made for a powerful force. Jason had occasionally seen them in action in large, multi-national actions like Makassar.

Because of Australia's deficit, Jason quickly guessed the identity of the silver ranker coming his way in a huge armoured personnel carrier. It wasn't someone he'd worked with personally but Kaito's specialised training had been carried out by the senior vehicle specialist.

Jason opened the car door and hopped out, using weight reduction to drift a moment and slow down before dropping his feet to the asphalt. Gordon waited on his left, with

Shade on his right. A short time later, a huge, futuristic armoured vehicle roared around the corner before slowing down to a stop.

“Mr Asano,” an amplified voice boomed from the vehicle. “I have no quarrel with you. Please walk away and don’t involve yourself in this affair.”

“Andreas Kosmopoulos,” Jason responded, his own voice booming in a trick of voice projection. “You’re chasing a friend of mine. I’m not going to let that go.”

“He stole from us.”

“Putting aside that the goods in question were plundered from reality itself and that none of you have a right to them,” Jason said, “he stole from the Cabal. Last time I checked, you were a member of the Network. Brisbane branch, if I remember rightly.”

“These are dangerous days and the old order is breaking down,” Kosmopoulos responded. “If the ship is sinking, you find anything you can that floats.”

“You’ve grabbed an anchor, Andreas, not driftwood. Let go, before clinging to it drags you under.”

“And what would you know, Asano? Running around the world, not having to watch everything you’ve come to rely on crumble and break. You were never in the Network. You never understood what it meant to be a part of it. How much was lost when it crumbled. Human civilisation is over; people just don’t know it yet. Now it’s about monsters claiming the biggest pile of the rubble that they can.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” Jason said. “I haven’t given up quite yet and I’ll never give up on my friends.”

“I know you’re powerful, Asano, but this is a bad fight for you. Only a fool fights a vehicle specialist on the road. My vehicle has no blood to poison or flesh to rot. It’s shielded against teleportation and intangible creatures, so neither you nor your familiars can breach it.”

A panel in the massive vehicle’s roof opened up and a huge rotary cannon emerged.

"It has weapons you cannot endure," Kosmopoulos continued. "The matchup is bad for you, Asano. Leave."

“Your one of those people that sees a guy on the TV and thinks ‘I could take him,’ aren’t you?”

“Very well, Asano. Bear the consequences of your actions.”

The rotary cannon spooled up and started spitting bullets. Gordon turned into a swirling nebula and dashed away before reforming, while Jason ducked into Shade and vanished. The gun started tracking Gordon, but six orange beams bore down on the

weapon and sheared it off. A force field snapped into place around the vehicle and a new gun that immediately started firing was conjured in place of the damaged one.

Gordon sank into the ground, avoiding the bullets, and started popping up in random places to blast six blue beams at the force field, only to vanish into the ground as the gun rapidly swung in his direction.

The silver-rank bullets fired specialty ammunition that added disruptive-force to the impact of the bullets, ideal for an incorporeal creature like Gordon. Sensitive to the dangerous damage type, he used dashes to avoid them. In between dashes, he fired bursts of the same damage: blue beams of pure disruptive-force that were highly effective against the force field.

The armoured vehicle started moving again, heading once more in pursuit of the other vehicles. As the force field collapsed, Jason appeared from behind a stone carriage and used his cloak's weight reduction to leap high into the air. His shadow arms reached out, grabbed the now-unshielded APC and dragged him to it. Its exterior immediately electrified and he tumbled, twitching off the back to face plant the street as the vehicle roared away.

"Not my most dignified moment," he muttered into the asphalt.

Chapter 403

When Someone is Under Your Gun

Jason pushed himself to his feet with a groan, his body still tingling from the electrical attack. The magical APC, looking like something from a sci-fi movie, had left him behind and was roaring around a corner in pursuit of the others.

"It's possible that you have been looking down on Earth's essence users too much," Shade suggested.

"I was thinking the same thing," Jason agreed. "If you would?"

Shade took the form of a motorcycle and Jason climbed aboard as Gordon disappeared into Jason. Two of Gordon's orbs appeared in his place and started orbiting around Jason as the motorcycle took off. The APC was fast but the much smaller bike was both faster and more manoeuvrable, leading Jason to soon catch up.

A machine gun emerged from a recessed panel atop the APC and started firing backwards, one of the orbs turning into a shield to intercept the bullets. The disruptive-force added to the damage quickly destabilised the shield but Jason started swerving left and right to buy more time before it collapsed.

The shield collapsed and the second orb took its place, although it, too, was swiftly chewed through. Bullets started hitting Jason and his cloak intercepted the attacks, but as with the shields, the disruptive force on the bullets was effective at negating much of his cloak's protective power. That left a good portion of the kinetic impact to slam into Jason.

Without a bunch of handy minions to afflict, Jason was at his weakest with both his physical fortitude and regenerative powers at their lowest point. That being said, at silver-rank the lowest point was still very good and Jason endured the barrage to draw closer to the vehicle.

"Let's give him some more targets," Jason said and six more bikes appeared alongside him, with Shade's bodies riding them. Jason conjured up starlight cloaks on each and they started weaving amongst each other, making which one was him harder to pick out. The machine gun started spraying them all, but with the bullets more diffuse, the cloaks were better able to endure them.

Jason cast a spell at the APC but as he did, the force field Gordon had torn down earlier snapped back into place around the vehicle.

"Bleed for me."

- You have afflicted target with [Necrotoxin].
 - You have afflicted target with [Sacrificial Victim].
 - You have afflicted target with [Bleeding].

 - Target is fully shielded.

 - [Blood From a Stone] does not take effect.
 - [Necrotoxin] does not take effect.
 - [Sacrificial Victim] does not take effect.
 - [Bleeding] does not take effect.
-

“Bloody hell.”

Jason had been spoiled by an aspect common to his spells, which was affecting targets directly, without an intermediary like a projectile. This was common in low-impact spells, the signature of affliction specialists like himself. Powers that provided comprehensive shields, however, were highly effective against such spells. Sadly for Jason, such powers were common, especially amongst healers. Jason had learned the frustration of that in the mock battles between his team and that of Prince Valdis of the Mirror Kingdom.

“Go again, Gordon.”

The nebulous familiar appeared and jumped out ahead of the APC in a series of dashes before once more blasting the vehicle's force field with blue beams. The front-firing rotary canon reappeared to harass him, preventing Gordon from constantly barraging the force field. Gordon also had two fewer beams, due to the orbs Jason had consumed as shields.

Seeing the limited effectiveness of his approach, Gordon instead fired two of his remaining six orbs at the shield, the orbs coming into contact just before they reached it and exploding with blue energy. The powerful blast of disruptive-force caused the APC's shield to immediately collapse again but Gordon was largely disarmed until his orbs recovered, which would take a minute for each. He fell back to be subsumed once more into Jason.

The APC had not been idle while Gordon worked. A roof panel slid aside and a stream of micro missiles fired up into the air before turning back and raining down on Jason and the Shades just as Gordon returned.

“Is this a bloody anime?” Jason decried as the bikes spread out. Gordon's last two orbs manifested beside Jason and started firing orange beams to intercept the missiles, the pinpoint beams intercepting the ones tracking Jason himself. The bulk of the projectiles hammered down on the Shades, however, rocking them with explosions.

Inside the APC, Andreas Kosmopoulos was watching the rear monitor where the chasing motorcycles had disappeared into a dust cloud as the missiles blasted the road.

“Did we get him?” asked the other person in the APC, a Cabal member named Javier.

“No,” Andreas said. “There’s no way that Jason Asano went down from that.”

The driver’s station in the APC was a futuristic command station with multiple screens and glowing control panels. There were no vulnerable windows in the vehicle, the exterior monitored through a series of external cameras. Asano was frustratingly hard to pin down, the vehicle’s normally excellent tracking systems having trouble targeting him. Even his image on the cameras was something of a blur, and the heat tracking wasn’t able to pick him up in the dust cloud.

Andreas glanced at the recharge time on the shield. One of his most critical defensive measures, it had now been rapidly brought down twice. His only consolation was that he was confident in the resilience of his vehicle. While Asano’s powers were famously destructive to life, the APC had no blood to bleed and no flesh to rot.

The conjured vehicle of a true specialist like Kaito or Andreas differed from most conjured items. The APC was much more powerful than something like Jason’s dagger but it held commensurate weaknesses. It was critical to many of Andreas’ other abilities that were either diminished or didn’t function at all without it. The biggest drawback was that once destroyed, there was a considerable cooldown before it could be called up again. There were other conjured vehicles he could use but these would only be lesser placeholders.

On the rear monitor, Asano emerged from the dust cloud. His decoy bikes were gone but he appeared unharmed. Andreas was retasking the rear gun when the damage report monitor started flashing red.

“MULTIPLE ABNORMAL CONDITIONS DETECTED,” came the APC’s mechanical voice.

“INTRINSIC NATURE COMPROMISED.”

“Intrinsic nature compromised?” Andreas wondered aloud. His APC had been subject to all manner of attacks over the years but this was something completely new.

“Andreas,” Javier called out in a panicked voice. “What’s that?”

A red liquid was leaking from between the spot where two wall panels joined.

“Some kind of mechanical fluid, probably,” Andreas said. “Asano is using some kind of attack I’ve never seen before.”

“ADDITIONAL ABNORMAL CONDITIONS DETECTED. INTRINSIC NATURE FURTHER COMPROMISED.”

Javier transformed into a wolfman, occupying more of the interior space but the APC was designed for moving groups of people. He sniffed at the liquid. Meanwhile, Andreas tried to get to the bottom of the continuing alarms.

“Define error ‘intrinsic nature compromised,’” he commanded.

“MECHANICAL SYSTEMS ARE NOW SUBJECT TO BIOLOGICAL VULNERABILITIES ON MULTIPLE PARAMETERS.”

“What does that mean?” Andreas asked.

“It means that your vehicle is bleeding,” Javier growled with his wolf mouth.

“It doesn’t have any blood,” Andreas said.

“I don’t think the guy who fought a zombie army with magic butterflies really cares.”

Vermillion’s stolen car was being pursued by multiple silver-rankers on foot. Three were vampires, including the one that had transformed into the gargoyle-like creature harassing them from the air. The other two were essence users, poached by the Cabal.

Vermillion’s stolen car had endured a lot of abuse but the pursuers had avoided using their most powerful attacks for fear of damaging the stolen goods, not realising those goods were not in the car at all. Finally, the car succumbed to a death by a thousand cuts and the engine gave out, the car slowing to a stop in the middle of the street.

A new black car dashed up, skidding to a halt in between the bullet-riddled car and the people chasing it. Dawn and Farrah stepped out, facing off against the pursuers. Seeing that Vermillion and the others in the broken car were not running, the pursuers slowed down to face off with the new arrivals. Vermillion, Frank and Night Stalker moved out to stand with Dawn.

“Farrah,” Craig greeted. “It’s been a while.”

The two essence users and the two vampires on foot came to a stop. The gargoyle-like creature flew down and transformed into a naked man.

“Larry,” Frank admonished. “Put on some damn pants.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do, traitor,” Larry said. “Besides, the ladies might like what they see.”

Dawn and Farrah looked Larry up and down, shared a glance and both smirked derisively.

“Hey...” Larry said, moving his hands to cover himself before turning back into a leathery monster.

One of the essence users hadn’t shifted his gaze from Farrah.

"I've been wondering about you for a long time, Hurin," he said. "Coming here, acting like you're so much better than us. Teaching us how to use our powers as if we're ignorant primitives. You're supposed to be so great; I'd like to see it for myself."

Farrah conjured her obsidian armour and jagged sword.

"Happy to oblige," she said.

Farrah had never been plagued by Jason's self-doubt and fears of moral decay. If someone wanted to make themselves her enemy, she would cut them down and sleep like a baby that night.

"It doesn't have to get violent," the other essence user said. "Just give us what you took and we can all walk away."

"The hell we can," one of the vampires spat. "You think they can just take from us and walk away?"

"Their vampires are second-grade weaklings," another vampire said. "Why make concessions when we are stronger?"

Each side had two essence users and three vampires, but the three Cabal vampires were silver-rank while Vermillion, Franklin and Night Stalker were only bronze.

"I hate to break it to you, but you got duped," Vermillion told them. "You chased the decoy. The blue blood and the reality cores are long gone."

"Enough talk," the first essence user said, raising his arm. An obsidian wall raised up in his face, which shattered as the lightning blast from his arm struck it. The shattered fragments then rocketed toward the essence user in a storm of razor-sharp stone. Dawn timed the casting of a spell to activate right as the essence user was distracted and he didn't notice the magic circle appearing under his feet. As the stone storm passed, webbing shot up from the circle to swiftly mummify him and Farrah smoothly followed up with a spell of her own.

"Fire bolt."

A blazing orb shot from Farrah's hand towards the essence user mummified in webbing. The webbing ignited immediately, throwing off an intense heat as it burned. Even so, it was being consumed slowly and kept the essence user bound as he had to force his way free.

"Oh, that's nice," Farrah said, admiring Dawn's spell as her fire bolt chained to the other essence user and the vampires. One quick spell was far from enough to deter silver-rankers, even if vampires were more vulnerable to fire. Their skin burning, they lunged forward into the wall that was Farrah and Dawn, the two women proving as impassable as a steel barrier.

One of the vampires was trapped in more threads that shot up from the ground, immediately igniting from Farrah's flames still burning on him. Another found Farrah's whip-sword wrapping around him, the obsidian fragments piercing his skin and the lava cord searing his flesh. The Vermillion and his companions teamed up to fend off Larry, the flying monstrosity.

Bankstown was now supernaturally volcanic, which suited Farrah just fine. There was a pyroclastic flow running alongside the road and she dragged the vampire wrapped in her sword in that direction.

"This is going to be fun."

"CATASTROPHIC SYSTEM FAILURE," the APC announced amongst a constant stream of warning messages.

"Your machine has a penchant for the obvious," Javier growled. The APC was melting around them, the walls were dripping black, poisoned blood from panels starting to look more like distressed flesh than metal as it fell off in gobbets. Andreas was trying every weapon ability he had while feeding as much mana as it would take into the self-repair system. The APC continued to let out warnings.

"SELF-REPAIR HAS NEGATED CONDITION 'BLEEDING' AND WILL RESUME NORMAL FUNCTION. CONDITION 'BLEEDING' HAS BEEN APPLIED. SELF-REPAIR SYSTEM DIVERTING RESOURCES TO NEGATE CONDITION 'BLEEDING.' SELF-REPAIR HAS NEGATED CONDITION 'BLEEDING' AND WILL RESUME NORMAL FUNCTION. CONDITION 'BLEEDING' HAS BEEN APPLIED. SELF-REPAIR SYSTEM DIVERTING RESOURCES..."

Andreas slapped his hand on the mute button. The rapidly degrading state of the APC was affecting the weapon systems but there were still enough to hammer Asano with bullets a flamethrower and even the occasional rocket-propelled grenade. He watched in frustration and disbelief as Asano stopped avoiding the attacks, only needing to periodically call up a new motorcycle as the one he was riding became damaged. Asano himself seemed invincible.

"Is that guy immortal?"

With afflictions applied and his Inexorable Doom ability continually stacking more, Jason's protective amulet was rapidly ticking over.

Item: [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] (growth, silver rank, legendary)

- Effect: For each instance of an affliction applied to an enemy, gain an instance of [Guardian's Blessing]. You may bestow all instances of [Guardian's Blessing] upon another person by touch.
 - [Guardian's Blessing] (boon, holy): Instances are consumed to absorb damage from any source. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. For each instance consumed, gain an instance of [Blessing's Bounty].
 - [Blessing's Bounty] (heal-over-time, holy, stacking): Heal over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Each affliction became a shield and each shield became a regenerative effect, which was boosted in strength by the blood robes Colin allowed Jason to conjure. Added to the formidable resilience of a silver-ranker and the diminishing attack power of the heavily damaged vehicle, Jason was no longer in any danger, although a large number of Shade bodies had been chewed through. It would take a lot of time and mana to replenish them but for the moment, Jason had a fight to finish. From the back of his motorcycle, he cast a spell.

“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”

Punition dealt damage for every instance of every affliction on the target. Jason sank extra mana into the spell and the APC's structure started to sag like a bouncy castle with a hole in it.

Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell.
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.
- Current rank: Silver 2 (17%).
- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.
- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Penitence].
-
- Effect (silver): Damage per affliction can be increased by increasing the mana cost to high, very high, or extreme. This reduces the cooldown to 20 seconds, 10 seconds or none. Consecutive, extreme-cost incantations have truncated incantations.
- [Penitence] (affliction, holy): Gain an instance of [Penance] for each curse, disease, poison or unholy effect that is cleansed from you. This is a holy effect.

- [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
-

Maximising the mana cost also maximised the damage and negated the cooldown, turning the spell into a high-damage mana-sink. He cast the spell again straight away, with the truncated incantation, then once more, the spell burning through his mana supply.

“Suffer.”

“Suffer.”

With each spell, the APC deflated alongside Jason’s mana supply, but to his surprise and admiration, it was not yet destroyed. Unsure if it would even work, he cast another spell.

“Feed me your sins.”

Jason drained the accumulated afflictions from the APC, which apparently qualified as an enemy. He was unsure if it was because he’d been able to levy afflictions on it or because it was a special kind of conjured object. Either way, Jason was replenished by consuming the massive array of afflictions he drained from it, filling his mana and stamina well past full. They continued to rise, along with his health, as the enemy afflictions were converted into a stackable recovery buff.

The APC no longer looked like a stricken beast and more like the vehicle it was, albeit one that had been plunged into a lava pit. It was glowing bright with transcendent damage that cared nothing for active defence mechanisms and auto-repair systems as it chewed away at the metal. Jason cast the final spell.

“Mine is the judgement and the judgement is death.”

The two men inside the APC were surrounded in transcendent light and the APC finally succumbed. They fell to the road as the moving vehicle around them vanished as the conjuration ended. That was not enough to injure someone of their rank and they quickly jumped to their feet.

Looking around, they saw a dark figure walking towards them, the motorcycle behind him dissolving into a dark cloud and being drawn into his shadow. Silver eyes watched them from a dark hood as he slowly approached. With the cloak wrapped around him and his smooth steps, it was almost like he was floating. The intimidating visage was broken as Jason pushed the hood back off his head, revealing a face bloodied from a bullet that had hit him in the head.

“Hello, Andreas.”

“Jason,” Andreas said warily. “I’m sorry about Kaito.”

“Not so sorry that you wouldn’t try and kill his brother.”

“You’re protecting someone who stole from us.”

“Reality cores aren’t yours to possess.”

“Only you get to have them?” Andreas countered.

“No one gets to have them,” Jason said. “You’re strip-mining reality. You think that won’t have consequences?”

“We’ve heard your claims,” Javier growled, still a hulking wolfman. “No one believes you’re going to save the world, Asano.”

“I know. I’m going to save it anyway. Go home, Andreas.”

“You’re letting me go?”

“Yeah. Do me a favour and remember that when someone is under your gun and you have a choice to make.”

Javier looked from Andreas to Jason.

“You aren’t just going to let this go?” he asked.

Andreas looked at the wolfman.

“He beat me at my best, and now I’m at my worst. You want to try him on, that’s your business.”

Javier turned to lunge at Jason but Jason’s aura came crashing down like a hammer. With just one target and nothing else to distract him, Jason could apply his aura at full force.

Title: [Giant Slayer]

- Overcoming a much stronger enemy has left a permanent mark on you that can be sensed by others. This may trigger a fear reaction from the unintelligent and the weak-willed if your aura is significantly stronger than theirs. Your actual rank being lower than theirs does not diminish the effect.

The wolfman froze, trembling like a prey animal.

“Take him home, Andreas.”

Andreas looked at the stiff Javier and felt the fear drenching an aura hunkered down like a mouse under the gaze of an owl. He turned to look at Jason.

“Thank you.”

Chapter 404

When, Not If

Farrah dragged a vampire out of the lava by the foot. He was still alive, or at least undead, due to his silver-rank fortitude. His normal vampiric healing was not kicking in, though, due to the burn damage.

"Why are you letting him out?" Night Stalker asked. "You should finish him."

"We came to save you, not to kill the people you robbed," Farrah said.

"What if they come after us again?" Night Stalker asked.

"Then you can lament your mediocre life choices."

"Leave it, Bryan," Franklin said.

"Forget this; I'll do it myself."

Night Stalker moved to grab the crippled vampire, only to find himself looking down the length of Farrah's sword.

"This is all very tense," Jason said from behind the group, no one but Dawn having noticed his arrival. The car Farrah and Dawn arrived in had turned back into a group of Shade's bodies, one of which Jason had stepped out of.

"G'day, Craig," Jason said.

"Jason," Vermillion said with a greeting nod. "Thank you for the save."

Jason looked around at a section of street marred by magical battle. There were scorch marks everywhere, a takeaway shop had what was left of Vermillion's stolen car sticking out of it. The two essence users were battered but alive, both strapped down to the road by webs that had the gleam of metal. There were three vampires, all severely burned and far too hurt to keep fighting. Vermillion and his companions had torn and bloody clothes but their injuries had already recovered.

"This is Frank," Vermillion introduced. "And this is Night Stalker."

"Night Stalker?" Jason said. "Like the serial killer from the eighties?"

"It's doesn't sound like a serial killer name," Night Stalker insisted.

"Yeah," Jason agreed. "It doesn't sound like a serial killer name. It *is* a serial killer name. There was a guy in the eighties who raped and killed a bunch of people in California. If you're a vampire and you're going to run around calling yourself the Night Stalker I'm going to put you down now and call it a public service."

"It's fine, Jason. He's not running around killing people; he's just an idiot. How do you know so much about serial killers?"

"I went to school with this guy who collected serial killer trading cards. Greg and I used to..."

Jason trailed off, hanging his head.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Craig, why are you chasing reality cores?"

"We're forming an alliance, with members of the EOA and the Network. We have the numbers but the leadership factions of each have most of the strongest members. We need to get stronger, fast."

"Are you going to be fighting in the transformation zones over cores?"

"Yeah."

"Don't expect further help, then. Reality cores aren't for anyone to have. That goes for you as much as your enemies."

"Our enemies are your enemies, Jason. Will you let them run rampant?"

"You're squabbling over who gets to be captain of a sinking ship, Craig, and you're throwing people overboard to keep it afloat. Look at the state of the world. The army is fighting mythical creatures in the streets of Sydney. America is on the brink of civil war because the Network wasn't careful enough with their secret coup. Europe is being taken over by vampires and China is reaching new heights of civic oppression keeping a lid on everything. Governments are turning tyrant or threatening to collapse entirely. We're on the verge of anarchy."

"Our alliance wants to remedy that," Craig said. "Keep preventing the monster waves. Protect the people. But we need the strength. Look, if you can tell me how to help you save the world or whatever, I will. I don't think I'm what you need, though. So let us do what we can and you do what you can."

Jason turned away, running a dirty hand over his bloody face.

"Craig," he said his voice weary. "Going after reality cores is pulling down the roof to burn for warmth in winter."

"And not going after them is putting down your sword while your enemy is picking his up."

"It doesn't matter who wins if the world burns."

"But it does if you save it," Craig said. "That's what you're doing, right? Saving the world. We're trying to make sure it's still worth a damn when you do."

"He's not wrong," Farrah said.

"Whose side are you on?" Jason asked.

"Yours," she said. "Sometimes that means telling you to let something go and get on with the job."

Jason looked at her, his expression unhappy, but he didn't argue.

"People taking reality cores are bad," she told him. "But do you think that telling Craig not to do it matters in the long run? You're frustrated that it's happening. We all are. But this is not the place to make that stand because it gets you nothing."

"I likewise detest that the denizens of this world would ravage it for power," Dawn said. "You aren't going to convince them to stop, however. People will always ignore the greater dangers in pursuit of momentary concerns. Humans, elves, this world or another. It is true every time, in every reality."

"The only way to stop people from taking reality cores is to cut off the supply," Farrah said. "Which we should probably get back to."

"You can do that?" Craig asked.

Farrah winced.

"I shouldn't have said that."

Craig shared a look with Franklin and they flashed into motion, grabbing a startled Bryan, dragging him to the lava flow and shoving him in, head first. Jason, Farrah and Dawn shared a confused look.

"Craig?" Jason asked.

The two vampires held Bryan under until he stopped moving, which didn't take long for the bronze-rank vampire.

"What was that about?" Farrah asked.

"Bryan was a plant," Craig said. "The faction of the Cabal loyal to the old vampires inserted him to infiltrate the new alliance forming against them."

"You're sure?" Jason asked.

"Yeah. We didn't give him a heads up about hitting the reality core storage but brought him along so he would think he was in the inner circle. We were going to use him for misinformation but we can't let the old vampires know you can turn off the tap. They'll make you their number one priority."

"I'm sorry," Farrah said. "I should be more careful."

"I didn't sense any duplicity from his aura," Dawn said. "Bloodline dominance?"

"Yes," Craig said.

"Which is what, exactly?" Jason asked.

"The dominus vampire bloodline allows those higher in the bloodline to completely control those below it," Dawn said. "When a dominus vampire creates another vampire, they can control it, along with any more that vampire subsequently creates."

“Bryan was part of the dominus bloodline,” Vermillion confirmed. “We’re pretty sure that one of the old ones in South East Asia somewhere was controlling him.”

“Bloodline domination functions rather like a star seed,” Dawn explained. “Like a star seed, it is intensely difficult to detect outside of special circumstances.”

“I had a bond with Bryan, using my bloodline,” Vermillion said. “The bond was severed when the domination was put in place.”

“A star seed hides so well because it infiltrates the soul,” Jason said. “How does this bloodline get in?”

“Only lesser vampires are transformed in body alone,” Dawn said. “Greater vampires – bloodline vampires – are changed body and soul. It is why they cannot be forcibly turned, unlike lesser vampires. They have to accept the change.”

“We have to accept the gift,” Franklin corrected.

“Mate, I’d return that gift,” Jason said. “It makes you eat people.”

After parting with Vermillion, Jason sent himself, Farrah and Dawn out to sea via portal and set up a cloud house. Distractions aside, they still had a node to repair and Jason needed to recover from the fight. A good number of Shade’s bodies had been wiped out by the APC’s weapon systems and it took most of Jason’s full mana supply to reconstitute one. He had managed to replace a few using the mana he had after the fight, far above his normal maximum but there was still work to do.

Jason went off to shower before he started meditating to replenish his mana as fast as possible. Midway through the shower, he swore out loud.

-
- Cloud flask supply of [Crystal Wash] has been exhausted.
 - Supply additional [Crystal Wash] or an alternative cleansing agent to maintain cloud construct cleansing effect.
-

He was surprised it had lasted as long as it had, the flask doing an effective job of diluting the huge quantity Jason had fed into it. That didn’t stop him from being aggravated when it finally ran out.

While Jason was showering, Farrah and Dawn went to the balcony to relax as they overlooked the Pacific. Farrah took the chance to ask some questions.

“I’ve been wondering about the vampires of this world. Do you know why they have so much more self-control than the vampires of mine? Is it the lower magic, somehow?”

"That is one of two factors," Dawn said. "Magically-charged sunlight has a negative effect on vampires. In the short-term, this means their strength is greatly reduced in sunlight. In the long-term, it has a degenerative effect on their minds."

"Does that mean as the magic of this world gets stronger, the vampires will start losing control?"

"Eventually some of them will, yes," Dawn said. "There is also the other factor to consider, however, which is strength of bloodline. The vampires of this world were spawned as echoes of other worlds. The oldest likely had the full strength of bloodline originators, so many of this world's vampires have much richer bloodlines than those of your world. It will shield them from sun degeneration."

"So, even the old vampires now being woken up can be reasoned with."

"Yes," Dawn said. "Although, I would not hold out great hope. Their personalities may not have been warped due to their vampirism but they will still be huge arseholes."

Farrah raised her eyebrows at Dawn's unexpected vulgarity and they both started laughing.

Jason trudged through the cloud house, where he encountered Dawn.

"Oh," he said, looking up. "Dawn, you don't know how to make crystal wash, do you?"

"I'm not an alchemist."

"But you could get the formula, right? Or something that works the same from another universe or whatever."

"Not while I'm in this avatar."

"But if we killed you off, though, you could grab the formula from wherever and bring it back. Then we just have to find a decent local alchemist... why are you looking at me like that?"

Dawn walked away.

"Is that a no?" he called out after her.

He continued on his way, finding Farrah on the balcony, lounging as she looked out over the ocean. He fell backwards as a deck chair made of cloud rose from the floor to catch him.

"All done?" she asked.

"Every Shade, present and accounted for. How goes the proto-space hunt?"

Finding the right nodes to repair required carrying out rituals in proto-spaces. As they improved their understanding of the process through trial and error, they had a better grasp of which proto-spaces would help them and which ones would throw out false

positives. It allowed them to be more discerning in their activities, making the search for each individual proto-space take longer but ultimately saving them time.

"We had one hit but it was a gold-rank space. You were still down a bunch of Shades and I thought trying it at anything less than full strength was a bad idea."

"You didn't tell me."

"Bad ideas are kind of your thing."

Jason chuckled.

"I suppose they are."

He pulled a silver spirit coin from his inventory and slipped it into his mouth.

"I miss cooking," he complained. "I really want to make a hazelnut dacquoise."

"I miss home," Farrah said. "Did you realise that I've spent more time in your world than you have in mine?"

He sat up, looking over at her.

"No," he said. "No, I didn't. But yeah, especially if you don't count all that time I was in an astral space."

"I've found your world as wondrous as you did mine," Farrah said. "I'm ready to go back though. More than ready. I want to see hairy idiot Gary. Rufus is no doubt hopeless without me. I want to see my parents. My city. We were so eager to escape it and now I'm desperate to get back."

Jason's chair slid across the floor to arrive next to Farrah's and he gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

"You'll get there," he said. "It's when, not if."

"I know."

"You're going to have to play tour guide when we get there, you realise."

"Oh, gods, no. I don't even want to think about the trouble you'll cause."

They both knew that their arrival in Farrah's world would not be a light, fun time, but they were happy, for the moment, to pretend. That their arrival would herald the worst monster surge in the history of the world was something to think about later.

Chapter 405

Not Entirely Ethical

Jason emerged from the water, up the ramp at the base of the cloud house that led into the ocean. The swim had been pleasant and relaxing, although his silver-rank body was far too heavy to float. He didn't need to breathe, however, so he was as happy under the surface as on it.

Emi continued to splash about, under the supervision of her father, Ian, and discordantly youthful great grandmother, Yuri. It had taken some convincing before Erika had allowed her daughter to go swimming kilometres out into the Pacific, with Jason taking steps to assure Emi's safety. He had put away the more modest cloud house and brought out the cloud palace. He configured it into a huge curve, forming an artificial lagoon, complete with underwater rooms that formed an artificial seafloor and a net at the lagoon's aperture. It formed a calm haven from the ocean waves, as well as any sharks foolish enough to come to the cloud palace in search of prey.

The cloud palace was a haven in more ways than one. In just the two weeks they had been working to identify their target reality node in Australia, the deterioration of world order had rapidly escalated. Australia itself was fine, in no small part due to an absence of the vampire lords making themselves known globally in even greater numbers than had been feared.

Several countries in Central America had already suffered total government breakdown, with several South American countries showing dangerous signs of following suit. America was a giant mess, already on the brink of mass civic conflict before vampires laid claim to Baltimore, Boston and Philadelphia.

Using the two gold-rank essence users in their ranks, the vampires in Philadelphia were resisted and killed but they lost many silver-rankers in the process of taking down eleven vampire lords.

China had been under a media blackout for months with the 'public protection measures' put in place months before letting almost no information out. The rest of Asia, as well as Africa, were both doing relatively well, with minimal vampiric activity, leaving the existing magical factions to continue fighting over reality cores. Russia and Europe were the exact opposite, suffering massive vampiric occupation.

Europe was the global hotbed for vampiric activity, with vampire lords laying claim to major cities all over the continent. Governments were working with the other magical

factions but Europe's Network branches had never been the powerhouses that China and the United States were. They would have trouble facing the vampires at the best of times, let alone in the midst of schism and factionalisation. Russia faced similar issues but oddly minimal resistance, with rumours of government collaboration with the vampires rapidly spreading.

The entire European Union had declared states of emergency but no effective response had been found. The vampire lords were forming councils in the various cities they laid claim to and were difficult to respond to. With small numbers of extremely powerful individuals, the vampires were too strong to face with the Network's elite forces but too few to face with overwhelming numbers.

Overwhelming force was a response tried in several cities, but while the vampires were killed or driven off, the price was unacceptable. The vampires, with their small numbers, used the population and infrastructure as shields, while Network forces were forced to rely on magically-enhanced ordnance designed to combat gold-rank threats. As a result, victory meant liberating a smouldering ruin, full of the dead.

Few nations were willing to pay that price after seeing the results and in many nations, the vampire lords were becoming de facto governments. Italy was the first nation to officially capitulate, in relatively bloodless fashion. France resisted hard but the razing of Paris and the vampires' bloody reprisals in other French cities effectively wiped out the resisting civilian authorities.

In the wake of his final talks with Kaito, Greg and Asya, Jason felt lighter than he had since before the Broken Hill tragedy. He smiled, letting the sun dry him out as he watched Ian dive bomb Emi, joining her in the water. Jason would take all the good moments he could get. Farrah came up to stand next to him, but instead of swimwear, she had the robust clothing she preferred to wear under her conjured armour.

"Another one?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Hopefully I can pinpoint the node today."

Farrah gave Jason the location and he opened a portal. He couldn't travel to the destination directly but could get within a hundred kilometres. During his time sweeping proto-spaces with the Network Jason had travelled to a lot of Australia, and now his portal could range out to sixteen-hundred kilometres.

They appeared in a small town still marred by damage from the monster waves. Shade bodies emerged from Jason's shadow and melded together to take the form of a

helicopter. Other than being black, it looked exactly like Kaito's. Jason and Farrah boarded and headed for the proto-space.

Some of the nations worst-hit by the current chaos had largely eliminated any Network presence, leading to a reappearance of monster waves. Australia was mercifully spared that, at least for the moment, despite the Chaos in Sydney and similar conflicts elsewhere. The leadership faction had moved to focus on reality cores, abandoning the old responsibilities to the larger but weaker faction, now going by the Global Defence Network.

One of the GDN teams entered a category three-dimensional incursion space, at which point the ritualist squad leader reported in to the expedition leader.

"Sir, we've done the checks and the readings are way off."

"How so?"

"The anchor monsters are already gone and the integrity of the space is too high. It won't break down until as much as twenty hours after it should."

"Then it looks like we've got an easy one."

"Sir?"

"He's here. Tell everyone to pack it up. With how thin we're spread, we can be more useful elsewhere than in a space that's already been handled."

Jason got a fix on the node and managed a successful repair before returning to the cloud palace with Farrah. Afterwards, they sat on a terrace discussing their work with Dawn.

"As I spend more and more time working within node space," he said, "it feels like I'm getting a better grasp on astral magic. It's not like a skill book, imprinting knowledge, but more like being immersed in the primordial clay of reality is giving me a direct sense of all the theory I've been studying. Concepts that were abstract and hard to grasp make sense to me now."

"I believe the nature of your being also has an impact," Dawn postulated. "Normal physical beings have a perception of conventional reality that is a hindrance to understanding the higher concepts within astral magic theory," Dawn said. "It takes an extraordinary mind or highly unusual circumstances to overcome that. Your being, like node space itself, is a gestalt of the physical and the spiritual, rather than two halves like Farrah, myself or this universe. Even someone with astral affinity will have trouble enduring it, yet you have no discomfort, do you?"

“No,” Jason said. “There’s an effect my abilities identify as dimensional discorporation, which sounds delightful. As you said, my unusual nature renders me impervious to it.”

“It could be said that node space is more the place you are native to than normal reality,” Dawn said.

“I’m not sure I like that,” Jason said. “I mean, it’s fine to visit but I don’t think I’d stay.”

“The question is whether this improvement to your understanding of astral magic is improving your ability to identify and repair nodes,” Farrah said.

“I think it is,” Jason said. “It feels like it is but I guess we’ll see as we keep going.”

“I ask,” Farrah said, “because I’m worried about what happens when the ambient magic crosses the threshold where magic starts manifesting directly. No more proto-spaces will make identifying nodes harder.”

“I don’t know how that will go,” Dawn said. “What Jason is doing amounts to pioneering a new sub-specialty of astral magic. Or, perhaps more accurately, he’s exploring a field that has always been taboo. This kind of interference with the physical/astral boundary is exactly what the World-Phoenix, and I as its representative, have always sought to sanction.”

“But you have to cut open that patient to perform surgery,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Dawn said. “If we haven’t sufficiently repaired this end of the link between worlds before the magic here changes, we will find a new methodology. What it will cost us is time.”

“I guess I should pack up the cloud palace,” Jason said. “With how things are going in Europe, maybe we should have gone there before Australia.”

“I don’t regret it,” Farrah said. “We cleared Australia’s only vampire lord, which puts it in a good place. With how many vampires are coming out of the woodwork, it may be that Australia becomes a fallback position for humanity’s magical forces. They’re fractured and scattered now but the vampire lords are just too powerful. The magical factions will need to stop fighting and come together.”

“Assuming the Americans don’t just nuke Venice,” Jason said.

Five spears made of red crystal slammed into Jason, throwing him back and pinning him to the wall. One went through his gut, one through his chest and one each in an arm and a leg, immobilising them. One went for Jason’s throat but he managed to dodge enough that it ripped a chunk from the side of his neck instead of piercing through the middle.

“You made a terrible mistake,” the vampire said as it walked slowly toward him.

“I know,” Jason said painfully through gritted teeth. “I should have changed before going out. This outfit is ruined. Which is ironic, given that you’re the one in need of a wardrobe update. I’m sorry, mate, but if you think those lace cuffs are working for you, I’ve got some bad news.”

“You are a fool.”

“I’m a lot of things,” Jason said. “Focusing on that one seems rude when there are so many options. I’m quite peckish, for example, which you’d know if you were polite enough to ask. I don’t suppose you’ve got a sandwich on you? Probably not a sandwich guy, right?”

“I am going to turn you.”

“Could you turn me into a construction guy? You’re damaging a museum, here. You know they have Carracci’s *The Choice of Hercules* here? I love that painting, although his choice should definitely be to put on some pants. I know the Mediterranean is a pleasant climate but it would be nice to see one picture of Herc where he wasn’t tackle-out. That’s rough sunburn to get.”

“I’m going to hurt you before I turn you,” the vampire said as blood flowed from his hand, took the form of a sword and crystallised into a razor-sharp blade.

“I don’t suppose you’re talking about hurting my feelings?” Jason asked optimistically. The vampire raised its sword to strike when webbing wrapped around it and yanked it backwards, sticking it to a wall opposite where Jason was pinned. The vampire immediately started yanking itself free, even as a fire bolt struck the webbing, setting it and the vampire ablaze.

The moment the vampire was pulled away, Jason cast a spell.

“Your blood is not yours to keep but mine on which to feast.”

The red crystal spears in his body turned back into blood and were absorbed into his body, healing the wounds that they, themselves had made and freeing Jason. As the spell took effect, dark mist shrouded him, swapping out his bloody clothes as his blood robes and starlight cloak were conjured around him.

“You took your time,” Jason said as the mist vanished. Threads already on fire snaked in through a large hole in the wall, wrapped around the vampire as it pulled itself free and yanked it once more, this time right out of the building.

“He hit me through a wall with a sculpture of a naked guy hanging out with a naked little boy and some grapes,” Farrah said. “It was more worrying than the vampire.”

“I wasn’t sure I could stall the guy out until you stepped in. If I’d tried to cast my spell with him right in front of me, he’d have stopped me before I could finish the chant. I couldn’t even shadow jump with those things in me. I think they stop teleportation.”

“How did you stall him out?”

“Talked a bunch of crap.”

“Then I’m sure you were fine. You played to your strengths.”

Dawn came hurtling in through the hole, clearly not voluntarily as she went tumbling over the museum’s display floor.

“Perhaps a little help?” she suggested, calm in spite of her dishevelled state as she lightly hopped to her feet.

Jason extended a shadow arm and smashed the ceiling light. There were more lights in the large hall and darkness didn’t impede a vampire, but that wasn’t his goal. The dim light and sculpture exhibits turned the area into a playground of shadows into which Jason melted as the vampire stalked back in through the huge hole in the wall where Dawn had pulled him out.

This vampire was stronger than the one they fought in Australia, turning its own blood into versatile weapons. With Jason added in, though, it was not as hard as the one Dawn and Farrah had faced without him. Dawn used control effects while Farrah staggered the vampire with blitz attacks. The final piece of the puzzle was Jason, taking the chances Farrah and Dawn provided to lock in his afflictions. The Farrah and Dawn kept it off balance until the afflictions overcame it.

When the vampire went down, they were barely able to keep it alive. Fortunately, Jason’s transcendent afflictions dropped off over time, allowing the gold-rank fortitude of the vampire to leave it barely clinging to life.

“I guess you drain it,” Farrah said.

“Actually,” Dawn said, “I would like to try something. Bring him and we’ll go; he’s not the only vampire lord in Naples.”

“What do you want to try?” Jason asked as he grabbed the vampire’s scorched legs.

“Something not entirely ethical,” Dawn said.

Chapter 406

Ahead of Schedule

“You want me to use this guy as a battery,” Jason said.

The cloud house had taken the appearance of an unremarkable and isolated farmhouse in the Italian countryside. The gold-rank vampire they had captured was locked in a cell from which they were confident it wouldn't escape. By silver rank, the cloud house was starting to show its diamond-rank potential as it grew more powerful and sophisticated. A single gold-ranker wasn't powerful enough to force their way in or out.

“Yes,” Dawn said as they observed the vampire through a one-way window.

“You weren't wrong about it being ethically questionable.”

“Vampires feed on people,” Farrah said. “Seems fair that you do the same to them.”

“And is that how we judge ourselves?” Jason asked. “By the standards of bloodthirsty monsters?”

“No,” Dawn said. “We judge ourselves by our actions. Not just the momentary ones but the larger scope of what we do. With what we are trying to achieve and the obstacles in our way, draining one bloodthirsty predator to get any advantage is a morally acceptable act.”

“And how far can we go?” Jason asked. “How many bad people is it okay to lock up and torture?”

“All of them,” Farrah said.

“What about good people?” Jason asked. “How many can we sacrifice? Where's the line? What's the number?”

“There isn't a number,” Dawn said. “Thinking there is some kind of objective value in all this that can be quantified is a fool's argument. Like all acts of morality, it's a matter of exercising judgement.”

“Yeah, well...”

Jason's shoulders sagged.

“...I'm not so sure I trust my judgement.”

“Then it is good that you are not alone,” Dawn said. “Miss Hurin was not sent to this world on a whim. She was sent so that you would have someone to rely on.”

“You're saying I'm the sidekick?” Farrah pouted.

Jason looked at her thoughtfully, smiling as she grinned at him.

“Alright,” he said. “Thank you. I'm still not comfortable just draining this guy over and over, though. Also, I don't think he's got a lot left in him.”

The vampire was not in good condition. Between Jason's transcendent damage and the fire powers of Farrah and Dawn, even a high rank essence user would have trouble surviving in his current state.

"We need to get some of the reality-core treated blood they drink," Dawn said. "He can work as a filter for you to top off, drain and then top off again."

"You talk about getting at their blood supply like it's a simple thing," Farrah said. "There was a reason we didn't raid the reality core storage in America."

"It's not the same circumstances, though," Jason mused. "The vampires don't have the ritual magic to emplace defences and mundane security measures won't stop us."

"Don't be so certain about the magical defences," Dawn said. "The Cabal may have recruited useful Network defectors."

"Yeah," Jason acknowledged, remembering the silver-rank essence users they fought in Australia. "If they can get top tactical personnel on board, recruiting some ritualists is certainly possible."

"Especially given how badly the Network is struggling in Europe," Farrah said.

The vampire lords had repeated the attack on the Sydney branch all over Europe, with far greater success. Sydney suffered massive damage from one vampire, while in European cities two, three, even six vampires had attacked network branches to eliminate their primary rivals. The Network was holding on in backup locations and tertiary branches, continuing to shut down proto-spaces, but their efforts were growing desperate.

"I believe that the circumstances are different enough that the potential rewards outweigh the risks. Only the vampire lords themselves would be powerful enough to stop us and you've seen their pridefulness for yourselves. They will not be as diligent as they should. At least until someone gives them a reason to."

"A gold-rank vampire is only going to play guard if a stronger vampire forces them to," Jason reasoned.

"And they won't be happy about it, so they probably won't be too diligent," Farrah said. "Still, it's a big risk."

"We still have Jason's trump card, if something goes wrong," Dawn said.

Jason had a magic item in his possession that he obtained a long time ago, during the Reaper trials. It was a diamond-rank consumable item containing the power of sunlight, which Dawn confirmed would be highly effective, even against vampire lords.

"That's something I want to keep in my pocket in case we find ourselves in a bad situation," Jason said. "We only get to use it once."

"If we're going to use it actively," Farrah said, "we should do it right."

“What are you suggesting?” Jason asked.

“What if we track down the biggest storehouse of reality cores and vampire blood in Europe to hit. Except, we leak that we’re going to hit it, so the vampires are waiting for us. But instead of trying to sneak in, we come in force. Carefully recruit some Network people and hit them hard. Use the item and wipe out as many of the bloodsuckers as we can.”

“In theory, that’s good,” Jason said. “There’s a good chance that if we’re recruiting, they’ll catch wind of it, though.”

“Then we let them,” Farrah said. “The vampires are prideful and won’t back down. They’ll bring even more of their number to utterly crush any opposition and prove their dominance. The more we can hit with the item, the more we can wipe out.”

“No,” Dawn said. “That is getting too big. We’re not here to kill vampires. Taking the chance to grow stronger when it costs us minimal time is one thing but taking the time to organise a large scale attack is too much of a distraction from our goal.”

“You’re right,” Jason said. “I like the idea of making a dent in the vampire population but that would be spending time we don’t have to buy risk we don’t need. I’m willing to spend days on this while we’re waiting for the right proto-space to pop. That kind of operation would take weeks of active effort, though. In the end, cutting off the reality core supply faster will ultimately save more lives than killing some vampires now.”

“Fine,” Farrah said. “I’m keeping this plan in mind, though. If we see a good chance to try it, I want to revisit this conversation. Dawn, it feels like every time we’re about to stage a great reality core heist, you throw cold water on it.”

“Boldness is a requisite of achieving our objectives,” Dawn said, “but to be bold is to walk on a foolhardy edge. We must be vigilant that we do not slip off that edge.”

“We still require a supply of treated blood,” Jason said. “We have to get it somewhere.”

“We conduct a smaller operation than Miss Hurin suggests. Something quicker and safer. Rather than hit one of the core vampire territories, we choose a peripheral target and raid the blood treatment centre there.”

“Will there even be one in a less important location?” Jason asked. “Won’t they just distribute the blood from a central, secure site?”

“Even the weakest vampire lord is an edifice of power and pride. None of them would allow anyone else to hold them hostage with the blood supply,” Dawn said. “Every vampire lord requires a regular supply of treated blood, otherwise the low levels of magic will rapidly diminish their power until they return to a state of torpor. Given the enemies they are making of everyone, they cannot afford moments of weakness due to breaks in the

supply chain. Reality cores they likely ship around, but none of the vampires will let themselves get too far from their blood supply.”

“That’s a weakness that hopefully gets taken advantage of when the time comes to deal with them,” Jason said. “Unfortunately, the world has too much happening all at once.”

“So we pick a city that’s big enough to have vampire lords, but small enough that the stronger vampires are elsewhere,” Farrah said. “That rules out going back to Naples, right?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “It’s too big and they’ll be on alert after this guy disappeared.”

They all looked in on the vampire, lying still in a miserable state.

Jason had used the cloud flask to produce its vehicle form. Previous it had taken the form of a large tour bus, while now it was a medium-sized yacht, moored amongst other pleasure craft at a dock in Venice. The only reason anyone was using the boats now was to escape the city. The tourist boats around them were all empty, which their aura senses easily confirmed.

“I’m still not sure Venice was the best bet,” Farrah said as they sat in the boat making plans. “Isn’t this the very first city the vampires took over?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “That’s why it’s the most damaged city. The Italian government hadn’t thrown in the towel yet and supported the Network standing up to the gold-rankers. Those original vampire lords were also some of the strongest, though. They left a crumbling city for larger population centres.”

“Vampires view population as a commodity, like herds of cattle,” Dawn said.

Jason and Shade had already done some initial scouting of the city. He had likewise been sceptical of Dawn’s suggested destination but what he learned eavesdropping on lower-rank vampires validated her choice. Venice was a soft target that no one thought of as one because it was known that the strongest vampires had emerged from it.

“The original vampire lords here have moved on to larger cities, leaving the weaker ones to manage it,” Jason said. “If you can call any of the gold-rank vampires weak. There are only two of them here.”

“Which makes it a good target,” Dawn said. “Venice is a symbolic territory for the old vampires, not a valuable one. This is especially true now that the fighting has caused so much destruction. There is no glory in ruling over ruins.”

While Dawn and Farrah remained hidden on the boat, monitoring the grid for proto-spaces, Jason went back out to investigate the city. Shade and his many bodies were an incredible boon on that front, with one body left behind so that Dawn and Farrah could speak to him through it and he could quickly shadow jump back to the boat.

Roaming the city, he found that the streets and canals were largely empty. He sensed the people unfortunate enough not to have evacuated during the fighting huddled in their homes, only venturing out for food. The vampires allowed some remnants of civic authority to remain operating, organising food distribution stations, even importing food from other Cabal-controlled territories.

Almost everyone out on the streets was a Cabal member, and most of those were vampires. There was no shortage of lower-rank vampires ready to cast off the veneer of civility and indulge their thirst for blood. Jason spotted more than one group breaking into a home and sending the occupants running before hunting and consuming them for sport.

Jason itched to step in but unless he had some plan to liberate the city, all that would do is bring more trouble down on the residents. Even if he made just a few lower-rank vampires disappear without a trace, the gold-rankers would be unwilling to tolerate challenges to their authority and investigate thoroughly. The first one to suffer would be the closest innocent people the vampires could find.

Jason and Shade trailed the low-ranking vampires around the city, gaining a better understanding of the city's state of affairs. It was like territory captured by an enemy army, with only the occupying forces out in numbers on the mostly empty streets. Many bridges and buildings had suffered catastrophic damage, with some canals flooding after being dammed by rubble. The vampires were pulling people out of their homes and forming work gangs to clear them out.

The canals themselves were otherwise empty of activity. The famously filthy water was even running clear in the areas not stained by building debris. There were swans and Jason even spotted fish swimming about. It was an oddly bright point in a city that had otherwise become a dystopian nightmare. He hated that after years of wanting to visit Venice, this was the state in which he found it.

Jason and Shade were also able to glean more information about the vampire lords themselves. The lords also needed more sleep than their less powerful brethren, despite the enhanced blood running through them. Vampire lords slept as much as twelve to fourteen hours, mostly during daylight.

Continuing to observe the lower-rank vampires, Jason learned of a growing rift between the vampires and the rest of the Cabal. The vampires were a minority within the organisation as a whole but waking up the vampire lords had turned them into a ruling minority. There was growing dissatisfaction amongst the cabal's many other factions, who were being edged out of positions of authority. There was also, from what he was hearing, a sizeable portion of the vampire faction that, like Craig Vermillion, did not support the old vampires.

Jason was scouting out the blood treatment centre set up in a medical clinic when Farrah called him back. He shadow-jumped back to the boat, arriving in the room where Farrah monitored the grid. It looked like the communications station of a spaceship, with screens and control panels everywhere. Farrah and Dawn were both watching different readings on the various monitors.

"You found a target proto-space?" Jason asked.

"No," Farrah said. "It's something else."

"Oh?"

"A transformation event had happened in a space that was already coterminous to a proto-space," Dawn said.

"Will they interact?" Jason asked.

"From the readings that the grid is throwing out, yes," Farrah said.

"What kind of effect is it having?"

"That is way beyond my understanding of astral magic," Farrah said. She and Jason both looked at Dawn.

"I believe," Dawn said, "that this world has decided to end ahead of schedule."

Chapter 407

Open Wound

As they walked through an army base in Germany, a handful of male Network troops threw up fists as they spotted the huge and hairy figure of Jack Gerling. The Germans had been avid about expelling the American Network forces from their country until the rise of the vampire lords changed everything. The powerful US forces had been critical in helping Germany deal with powerful vampires across multiple cities, leaving it as one of the least ravaged nations on the continent. In return, Germany was now the US Network's key staging point in Europe.

"Beer and titties!" they called out.

"Beer and titties!" he responded with a grin, pumping his own fist into the air.

His power and importance made him a recognisable figure on the base and he had gone out of his way to make friends with all the tactical teams. It cost him little to sow seeds that could potentially have him reaping a critical harvest in the future. He walked through the base, greeting various people as he went until he reached his personal quarters. The moment he stepped inside, the friendly expression on his face went blank.

He was being more careful with his boorish façade, having let it slip too much in the wake of the fight with Asano. The leadership was still very tight with the reality cores and the last thing he wanted was to be seen as too capable to control.

The American Network's leadership had made a priority of advancing more people to category four, especially with the rise of the ancient vampires. It wasn't the disaster in the US that it was in Europe but it was bad enough and only getting worse. The Network had been keeping a collection of people just short of category four and already reality cores had allowed two of them to cross the threshold.

This was in addition to the other category four who, like Gerling, had been woken up from stasis. Gerling was still the only one of the category fours the US Network had in Europe as the others were assigned to handle domestic problems. For the moment, Gerling was too valuable to be expendable.

Already, though, he had seen signs of the leadership becoming nervous about the category fours and the danger of them seizing power. Until he could be certain of a regular reality core supply, Gerling would keep leaning into his more self-indulgent urges, playing the hedonist thug.

His quarters on the base reflected this, being filled with personal luxuries he had obnoxiously demanded. His handler, Cleary, was more than happy to meet them, satisfied

with the minor concessions he gained for providing them. Cleary, especially, had seen behind Gerling's mask and was looking to alleviate his suspicions. By being consistent with his self-indulgence, he would slowly but surely lead Cleary to dismiss any doubts.

Battling Asano and Hurin had been a startling wake-up call for Gerling and although he maintained an outward display of hedonistic excess for his nominal masters, he quietly dedicated himself to growing stronger. The US had always had the best training programs, alongside China, and what Farrah Hurin had introduced to the Network had been used to refine them.

Gerling had gone through the same training as everyone else but had always coasted on the explosive potential of his abilities. Those powers were the reason he had been chosen as one of the first to raise to category four. It was only after the magical deficit forced him to let himself be placed in stasis that he realised that he had also been chosen for expendability if something went wrong.

Now, Gerling had a team of trainers helping him drive his abilities to new heights, refreshing the skills that had been drilled into him years ago and allowed to fall fallow. He kept his training quiet and his recreation loud, making sure to complain about the effort.

Inside his quarters, his personal assistant was waiting for him. He had two of them but only cared about one. Fiona was smart and ambitious. Gerling was confident that she knew that she would go further with genuine loyalty than reporting on him to Cleary. She did make those reports, but they contained exactly what Gerling wanted them to.

As for his other assistant, Gerling constantly amused himself by assigning the young man a series of lengthy and elaborate demands. To his surprise, his assistant's dedication and enthusiasm led to his unexpectedly fulfilling Gerling's often bizarre and indulgent requests.

Fiona handed Gerling a memory stick.

"This is everything I could get on Asano's encounter with the EOA in Venezuela," she said. "Several essence users were using that small town as a retreat so there are quite a few testimonials there from people with magical and aura senses. There is also a lot of footage shot from phones."

Gerling took the memory stick, tapping it against his other hand absently, lost in thought. He had watched the news footage of Asano, killing the EOA's enhanced humans more than a dozen times. It was Asano's aura that concerned Gerling the most. Being a skilled essence user with excellent command of his abilities was something Gerling could accept. The raw power of his aura, however, overturned Gerling's understanding of what

was and wasn't possible. What else was Asano capable of? Could Gerling obtain that power for himself?

"Anything new on here?" he asked, holding up the stick.

"Not any major details," Fiona said. "Additional confirmation that Asano killed them using his aura alone, based on what the witnesses were able to sense."

Gerling moved to a desk and plugged the memory stick into his laptop.

"Thank you, Fiona."

"What do you mean by the world ending early?" Jason asked. He, Dawn and Farrah were still in the cloud boat, discussing the overlap between a proto-space and a transformation event.

"These transformation events are well outside of my experience," Dawn said. "This event is still ongoing, so no one can enter the zone to confirm anything until it completes its transformation and opens up again. That being said, I have seen all manner of dimensional events and sufficiently unstable dimensional forces all have similar results."

"And?" Farrah prompted.

"Based on the readings we've been taking from the grid, I believe that something very dangerous is happening."

"Dangerous like a super monster wave?" Farrah asked.

"Far worse, I'm afraid," Dawn said. "Dimensional ulceration."

"Oh, that's bad," Jason said with a wince.

"Can someone explain that to the person not specialised in astral magic?" Farrah asked.

"Imagine an open wound in the side of the universe," Jason said. "That's very, very not good in a universe whose dimensional membrane is stable and healthy. In a fixer-upper universe like ours... I don't even want to contemplate."

"In the best case," Dawn said, "it will establish a second source of magic that will start feeding into this world."

"Like the dimensional link we're going to all this effort to fix," Farrah said.

"Precisely," Dawn confirmed. "Except that this source will be impossible to cut off. Normally the World-Phoenix and her agents would work to remedy such a situation but Earth's dimensional membrane is like a thin sheet of glass, already full of cracks. Trying to repair it could shatter it entirely."

"That's the best case?" Farrah asked.

"The worst case," Dawn said, "is that the dimensional membrane rapidly collapses and this world is annihilated. That subsequently tears a chunk out of this entire reality, chaining into the universe completely breaking down. It's more likely the damage will be contained to your planet, or at least your solar system, but it may end this entire physical reality."

"So, worse than a super monster wave," Farrah said.

"Considerably," Dawn agreed.

"I'm assuming you have a plan," Jason said. "I'd really like to hear a plan."

"It may be possible for you to stabilise the effects," Dawn said. "During a transformation event, the entire area is sealed. I believe this is because the area is drawn at least partially into what you, Jason, have been referring to as node space. The dimensional changes taking place are being affected by the proto-space coterminous to that area, causing what is already a reality-shearing transformation to go out of control."

"You think I can use the Builder's door to enter the sealed space," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn said. "The World Phoenix personally sculpted a racial gift evolution that would make you the perfect living tool for resolving problems in dimensionally unstable space. Your presence alone will be a help."

"Hold on," Jason said. "You want me to go into a place that can't be entered and brave conditions that are completely unknown in an environment being torn apart and rebuilt at a level that makes subatomic particles seem shallow?"

"I know it seems too dangerous to—"

"Awesome," Jason said.

"Pardon?" Dawn asked.

"No piles of victims turned zombies. No saving who I can while the dead pile up around me. Just going some crazy pocket dimension for some good, clean world-saving? Get it right and everybody lives?"

Jason nodded his head, grinning.

"I think I've needed this for a long time," he said.

"You will have to go alone," Dawn said. "No one else can reliably survive the conditions within an active transformation event, except for the people who are part of it and they don't remember anything. They are, at the very least, unconscious. More likely, they exist in some kind of transitional state and you should avoid them as best you can. For your sake, as much as theirs. I was trying to tell you that it will be dangerous."

"You were also telling me that I would have to do it anyway right?"

"Yes. It needs to be done and only you can do it."

“You know that the transformation event will be crawling with people gearing up to snatch the reality core, right?” Farrah asked. “This will reveal Jason’s door power to everyone. They won’t understand everything about it, but the ability to enter transformation events is all they’ll need. They’ll start coming after him because they’ll think he can give them a head start on core collecting.”

“If only they knew,” Jason said. “Reality cores are pebbles on the ground in node space.”

“Unfortunately, there will be no getting past them unnoticed,” Dawn said. “There will be considerable attention on the transformation space. You will need to enter swiftly, in case anyone attempts to intercept you before you do.”

“Which is why I need to go alone,” Jason said. “You can’t come in with me and you can’t hang about with all the others outside.”

“Leave your family as well,” Dawn said. “If the worst happens and you fail, I will make sure they and Miss Hurin are sent to the other world.”

“You can do that?” Jason asked.

“If this world’s dimensional membrane enters a state of irreversible collapse, I no longer have to worry about damaging it. I can intervene directly and take them away in my dimensional vessel.”

Jason gave her a warm smile.

“Thank you.”

Each transformation event had a tense prelude where the different magical factions arrived and everyone waited for the impassable barrier to drop so the search and fight for the reality core could begin. Fighting breaking out beforehand was more common than not. The rise of the old vampires had only added to the already strong position of the Cabal in these conflicts, as all their members grew stronger in transformation spaces.

There were places where Network held the edge, however. In Europe, Jack Gerling was the single most powerful individual. The old vampires outnumbered him, but his abilities were specialised in devastating large numbers of enemies, levelling the playing field. Rumours spoke to similar circumstances in China, although very little information got out. No one was even sure exactly how many gold-rank essence users they had, although no one doubted they had at least some.

The transformation zone that appeared on the plains of western Slovakia was special because of the proto-space it formed on top of. This drew unusually large forces from every faction, all of whom could now tap into the grid. The EOA gained access when they

took over Network duties at the request of several governments. The Cabal gained access more recently though Network defectors.

None of the magical factions had the understanding of astral magic that Dawn or even Jason possessed. They could tell that the transformation space was unusual but most were postulating that the result would be additional reality cores, not an inexorable doomsday clock.

The transformation zone was currently a glimmering dome several kilometres across. A giant rainbow under glass, it swirled with bright, wild colours. In the nearby city of Nitra, Jack Gerling was sitting at an outdoor café, rather than hovering around the dome. Even if the event was unusual, it was unlikely to open up for days, like always. The estimations were that it would take more time than normal, not less.

Nitra was something of a blessed city, being too small to host any ancient vampires but large enough to warrant Network protection during the monster waves. It was now a major centre for the Network after being pushed out of Bratislava by vampires. As a result, it had weathered the magical tribulations of the past several years in far better stead than most, allowing the residents to maintain at least some aspects of their normal lives.

As he sipped at his coffee, Gerling's gold-rank perception allowed his eyes to pick out something moving through the air, despite its great altitude. It struck him as odd as normally planes stayed away from transformation zones, and this one was jet black. After months of investigating Jason Asano's behaviour, he knew what a black vehicle going somewhere it shouldn't meant.

"He's here."

Chapter 408

Looting a House Burning Down Around You

In the Slovakian city of Nitra, Gerling stepped out into the street and launched himself into the air with gold-rank strength, sailing high over the rooftops. As he reached the top of his arc, he triggered an explosion that sent him rocketing through the sky. More explosions continued to send him hurtling in the direction of the giant dome out on the plains.

Shade's plane form dissolved into a cloud of shadows from which Jason dropped out. The cloud trailed him like the tail of a dark comet as he descended, being absorbed as he plunged through the air. Jason allowed himself to freefall, angling his body towards the huge target of the dome.

The auras gathered around the transformation zone told the story of the magical factions waiting to exploit it. The contentious Network factions were split into various camps. There were the American Network and the old leadership faction, still calling themselves simply the Network. Jason couldn't differentiate one from another just by the aura of essence users, while the other factions were more obvious.

The breakaway Global Defence Network was not just comprised of essence users but also former EOA and Cabal members. Unhappy with the direction their factions had taken since magic was revealed to the world, they banded together and were the most numerous of the current magical factions. Their weakness was that for all their numbers, they had a limited number of powerful elites.

Jason would be more sympathetic to their cause if they weren't here to plunder reality's treasures like everyone else. He understood their need for strength to compete with the other factions, but his time in node space gave Jason a better sense than even Dawn of what stripping the Earth's reality cores was doing. He couldn't bring himself to accept people tearing the fabric of reality apart for their own ends.

Also present were the Cabal, split into vampire and non-vampire camps. It reinforced what Jason had learned in Venice about the Cabal's internal tensions. The last faction present was the EOA, who had long been the poor cousins in the fight over reality cores. That was slowly changing, though, as more of the magical drug that boosted them temporarily to gold rank was disseminated. This allowed them, at least briefly, to match up with the power of vampire lords.

The EOA had largely abandoned the League of Heroes and the hero gimmick to operate more openly. It was a difficult position to maintain when other forces were

demonstrably stronger than what were ostensibly superheroes. Now they were operating more like superhuman paramilitary, although their flight and eyebeam powers still maintained a very superheroic flavour.

There were several gold rank auras present in the vampire camp, but the most powerful aura present was approaching at blistering speed from the direction of the nearby city. There were explosions of magic in the distance, one after another, which Jason sensed before the sound of them reached him. They were propelling the gold-rank aura was rocketing toward the dome at supersonic speed.

“He’s here,” Jason murmured, his words whipped away in the speed of his descent. He angled his body down for maximum acceleration, trying to reach the dome before the gold-ranker that killed Kaito, Asya and Greg arrived. He aimed for the very peak of the dome, to avoid the factions gathered around it. He used his cloak to decelerate at the last moment but still landed hard on the glassy surface of the dome. Underneath, energy swirled like a rainbow lava lamp.

Without hesitating, Jason opened the magic door, although its appearance was different from the norm. Ordinarily, Jason’s portal abilities, be it the spirit vault, the node space door or a normal portal, took the form of an arch of dark, smoky glass with glimmers of transcendent light within. The node door he called up this time was set directly into the surface of the dome, the familiar glassy stone forming a ring. It was an aperture into the dome, exposing the rainbow energy otherwise trapped beneath the dome’s surface. The exposed energy churned like a boiling cauldron.

Gerling arrived next to the portal without slowing down, the impact releasing a massive gong-like sound, along with a shockwave that whipped at Jason’s blood-coloured robes. Each standing on opposite sides of the portal, they stared each other down.

“I talked to my girlfriend after you killed her,” Jason said. “She told me that I shouldn’t go looking for revenge.”

“You don’t have the strength for revenge.”

“No today,” Jason said as Shade’s bodies emerged to stand around him. “But you don’t have a fancy teleport trap in place, either. I don’t think you can catch me. Neither do you.”

“How did you get away the first time?” Gerling asked. “It was something to do with your aura, right? Negating the suppression collar? Is it an essence ability that lets you do that? An outworlder power?”

“I’m not here to answer your questions. I have more important things to deal with.”

“What are you doing here? Finally joining the fight for reality cores?”

"Think what you want," Jason said. "I've warned you all and no one cares."

Gerling stared at Jason, his face conflicted.

"I've been investigating you since we fought. You really are different from the essence users of this world."

"What does that matter to you? You're here for reality cores like the rest. You're all too obsessed with power to realise you're looting a house burning down around you."

Gerling looked down at the portal set into the dome.

"Are you really trying to save the world?"

"Yes."

"From what?"

Jason thumped a foot on the dome.

"I don't know if you've noticed," he said, "but our planet is coming apart at the seams. I've been trying to stop it from slowly disintegrating but now there's this thing and I have to stop it from quickly disintegrating."

"Everyone thinks there will be more reality cores than normal when this dome opens."

"Maybe there will be, I don't know," Jason said. "But if I don't go in there and fix this today, it won't matter what's in here."

Gerling turned his gaze from the portal back to Jason. They could both sense more auras rapidly ascending the dome in their direction.

"Go," Gerling said. "Do what you have to do."

"Seriously?"

"I have questions, but I'll catch you another day."

"Leaving me to do this doesn't absolve you for killing my people."

"I don't want your absolution," Gerling said. "I want your secrets."

Jason would have fired back another retort but the auras were drawing close and he didn't have time. Letting Gerling have the last word, he stepped over the portal and dropped inside, like falling through a manhole. Gerling was left alone with the portal.

"He talked to her after I killed her?" he wondered out loud.

The atmosphere was tense and people from all the various factions stood around the portal. Everyone was looking at everyone else as they eyed-off the new entrance to the sealed transformation zone.

"Gerling, what happened?" asked a silver-ranker from the American Network.

"Someone opened a door," Gerling said. "Any of you want to go in, I'm not going to stop you."

“You’re the most powerful person here,” the silver-ranker said. “You can beat everyone to whatever is inside.”

“I’m not sure I want whatever’s inside,” Gerling said.

“You let fear guide you,” a vampire lord sneered.

Gerling turned his gaze and his aura on the vampire, who met his eyes for a moment before flinching. Whatever else might be happening, Gerling was still the most powerful being out of everyone gathered atop the dome.

“If anyone is willing to play lab rat, go right ahead,” Gerling told the assemblage. “Tell me how it goes.”

He leapt back into the air and shot off with a series of explosions.

Jason dropped through the portal, set into the ceiling of a small, windowless room. It had faded, floral-print wallpaper that was torn and peeling, revealing aged and cracked plaster underneath. A closed wooden door was the only visible exit.

Jason’s head swam, his vision unable to penetrate the shadows in the corners of the room. The only light was the multihued glow of the portal over his head. His conjured cloak and robes were gone, leaving him in his underwear with his boots and magical amulet.

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

His aura and perception power were both gone. They were so much a part of him, an extension of himself that to suddenly lose them felt crippling. His basic senses were still enhanced by his silver-rank attributes

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- Both magical and physical aspects of this space are in a state of severe flux.
 - Your ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has a stabilising effect on the immediate space around you. You may exert the influence of your soul to permanently stabilise areas of the affected space.
 - Utilising your soul to express influence over this space brings a chance of permanent alteration to your physical and/or magical properties.
-

“Oh, what the bloody hell is this?”

The method he used to cause changes within node space involved leveraging his aura as a tool, something Jason had become increasingly adept at. Now he could no longer do so due to the loss of his aura power, despite that being the entire point of coming into the transformation zone.

The hope had been that stabilising the transformation zone would be much the same as rectifying a node, which was tricky but more or less safe, and something he had done before. Instead, he now had to figure out how to somehow imprint stability on the space by exposing his soul to unpredictable changes. If there was anything less than the whole world at stake, he'd be inclined to flee immediately.

He was currently in a small, enclosed space. His options of what to do first were experimenting with exerting control over the space with his soul and opening the door to take stock of his surroundings. Both approaches had merit, with the explore option potentially giving him a better understanding of what he was dealing with. Figuring out some kind of control, on the other hand, might give him a critical tool should he run into some kind of threat.

He decided to stay put for the moment and take stock. He could still feel the presence of his familiars in his soul, but they were unable to manifest their vessels due to the negation of his essence powers. He hoped the vessels were simply suppressed and not destroyed. He lacked the resources to resummon his familiars and no longer had the contacts to source more of them.

A quick test revealed that Jason's essence abilities might be gone but his outworlder powers remained intact. He was unsure if this was normal for racial gifts or the result of the Nirvanic Transfiguration power the World-Phoenix designed for him. Either way, it let him pull a fresh set of clothes from his inventory.

"At least I don't have to save the world in my underpants. It'd be a good story, though. Maybe I should... no, that wouldn't be sensible."

Jason also took out his sword, Dread Salvation. It had been roughly three years since Gary made him the sword but it felt like a lifetime ago. Dread salvation had been designed to help Jason in his moments of greatest need, a gesture of gratitude for helping Gary in his time of need. It did so by helping Jason fight enemies his powers were unable to hurt. Since reaching silver-rank, Jason hadn't pulled it out. Not only did Jason have the power to bypass such immunities, now, but the growth weapon was limited by Gary's skill at the time he crafted it, only able to grow to bronze-rank strength.

Jason's reliance on his conjured weapon, currently denied to him, meant that his under-ranked sword was the only backup that he had. Even so, the familiar grip in his

hand was a reassuring presence when he was alone in what was sure to be a bizarre realm.

Further testing his powers, he pulled up his map ability. The racial evolution of his map power, which gave him access to a tactical mini-map, was not something he used very often. It allowed his aura and magic senses to map the location of anyone or anything they sensed, but Jason largely relied on his aura senses directly. It was most useful in tight, complex confines, such as stalking the vampires in the Network office in Sydney.

The results of bringing up the map were a little disconcerting. Only the room he was in was marked on it. There was a fog covering the space outside the room, and the edges of the map were shifting and changing as he looked at them. He checked the listed location.

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

It was the first time Jason had seen a special note like that for a location, especially one as disconcerting as 'does not fully exist.' Even remaining in a proto-space until it completely collapsed didn't give him such a warning.

Continuing to test his available abilities, his power to turn Shade's bodies into vehicles was a nonstarter as Shade was unable to emerge in the first place. His last active power was his spirit vault, which he was unsure about trying. His spirit vault was the doorway to his soul, which he was wary about opening. The system message had warned him that exerting his soul in this place could permanently change him in unknown ways.

Opening up his soul in this strange space was potentially dangerous, although it also could be the key to using his soul to stabilise the space, given that he was currently unable to wield his aura. After some consideration, Jason decided that with the circumstances, the restrictions on him and the stakes, he had to take some risks.

He tried opening the spirit vault but the familiar archway didn't appear. Instead, the dilapidated room around him started to change. The walls slowly started transmuting into the familiar smoky glass, faintly radiating light, that his portal arches and the pavilion in his spirit vault were made of. As it changed, Jason felt his aura awaken, slowly giving him control over it once more.

Chapter 409

Domain

Jason was in a small room that was transforming from a dilapidated plaster box with peeling wallpaper to a stone room shaped by his own power. He had tried to open his spirit vault but instead, the space around him seemed to be turning into his spirit vault. It was more than a little disconcerting, although the benefits were obvious. One was that he may have stumbled onto the means by which he could stabilise the transformation zone before it gouged a wound in the skin of the universe.

The other benefit was that Jason could once again express control over his aura. It lacked the specific powers that came from his aura essence ability but he was able to project the power of his soul outwards once more. It only extended as far as the transforming walls, which suggested that Jason could somehow claim dominion over the space by transforming it.

The only part of the room not transforming was the wooden door. Jason was contemplating opening it when it exploded inward as some manner of monstrosity burst in, slamming Jason against the opposite wall. It happened too fast for him to get a sense of what he was fighting, other than it being big, fleshy and warm as it pressed him between its mass and the wall.

He couldn't reach the sword at his hip so he employed wrestling techniques to wedge his arms between himself and his attacker, earning himself some literal wiggle room. This allowed him to slip out of the creature's press and take what little space he could in the enclosed room.

The creature was comical in proportion: a blob of muscly flesh on a pair of ordinary human legs that looked far too frail to support it. It had no arms, no face, just a pink, fleshy mass. Jason wasn't even sure how it squeezed through the normal-sized door. As it awkwardly turned its legs in his direction, he drew his sword, which seemed to enrage the creature. The front of it opened like a mouth, the skin and flesh pulling apart with a wet ripping sound. Square, uneven, fist-sized teeth pushed their way through the meat at the top and bottom of the wound-mouth. It let out a scream of rage and pain that chilled Jason's blood.

Jason backed up hard against the wall as it rushed him again, lifting both feet to intercept the creature, pushing back against it to maintain a gap as it pushed him harder into the wall. It snapped its mouth as Jason fended it off with his legs, his sword held

overhead in both hands. He started stabbing down but the blade slid off its rubbery skin, leaving not so much as a scratch.

The creature managed to get its mouth around one of Jason's boots, twisting to fling him around. He barely held on to his sword with one hand as the creature shook him like a dog with a toy. Using his silver-rank flexibility and strength, Jason flexed at the waist to extend his empty hand into the creature's mouth, grabbing one of the big square teeth. He used the leverage thus gained to plunge the sword into the creature's mouth, burying it deep into the flesh within. Yanking the blade savagely back and forth, he ignored the crushing force of the mouth on his arm and foot until the creature dropped dead. It's lifeless body landing heavily atop Jason.

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- You have defeated [Living Anomaly].
 - Would you like to loot [Living Anomaly]?

 - Interaction with [Living Anomaly] has instigated random changes in weapon [Dread Salvation]. Further interaction will consolidate change.
 - Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised and refined changes to weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - [Dread Salvation] transformation status: 0.4%.

 - You have established a spirit domain. Expanding your spirit domain will define and stabilise unstable genesis space but trigger anomalous reactions from genesis space outside the spirit domain.

 - Interaction with genesis space has instigated uncontrolled secondary evolution of ability [Spirit Vault]. Further interaction will complete evolution.
 - Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised and refined the secondary evolution path of [Spirit Vault].
 - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 0.003%.

The first thing Jason did was loot the monster sprawled on top of him, which dissolved into the thickest rainbow smoke Jason had ever encountered. Unlike normal rainbow smoke, which was incorporeal and passed through any solid object before dissolving into the astral, this smoke was heavy, oily and seeped into the smoky glass bricks of the room. It also had, by some dark miracle, an even more repellent stench than regular rainbow smoke, which already smelled like hair being burned inside the carcass of a dead whale. Even with Jason not needing to breath, it was like the rancid stink was permeating his skin.

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- [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 0.004%.

 - [Stable Genesis Core] has been added to your inventory.

- 10 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Jason lay on the floor, feeling his injuries rapidly heal. The fact that Colin's regeneration was still in effect probably meant that the vessels of his familiar were intact and simply unavailable, which was good. He was unable to pull out Gordon's orbs, which meant that only the passive bonuses of his familiars were being passed along while the active ones remained sealed away with his essence abilities.

After pushing himself up to a sitting position and shuffling back to lean against the wall, Jason took a closer look at the system messages. Using his sword on the creature had triggered a nascent transformation in the weapon, with his Nirvanic Transfiguration ability directing that change in a positive direction. The same was true for using his spirit vault power to stabilise the transformation space.

He reminded himself to have Dawn thank the World-Phoenix for the power. He knew that it wasn't generosity but the need for a tool that could repair the damage to Earth. Since he would have tried to do it either way, though, he was grateful for the ability. More and more he realised that it shaped him into exactly the right tool for the job. Without it, he would have failed long ago.

"Greg called me a tool more than once," he said to the empty room with a sad smile. "I guess I can't begrudge some super god from taking it literally."

Jason's independent streak was strong but, for the moment at least, he and the World-Phoenix had the same objectives. He might not trust the great astral beings, with their alien minds and epoch-spanning agendas but he was forced to acknowledge that they had done a lot for him. Whatever their motivations, the World-Phoenix brought him both home and back from the dead, while the Reaper brought back Farrah. If the price for all that was saving a world or two, he was happy to pay it.

Jason looked up to where the rainbow smoke from the living anomaly seemed to be absorbed by the space he had stabilised. There were a lot of unanswered questions about the living anomaly. Firstly, how did Jason's power know it was called a living anomaly? Did his mind arbitrarily assign it or did Jason have some kind of extremely powerful divination power he was unable to actively employ? There was also the question of the anomaly's rank.

Jason's aura senses had been restored alongside his aura, albeit in a similarly restricted fashion. It was definitely enough to recognise that the anomaly had been silver rank, though. Was that a coincidence? It seemed odd that a reality-reshaping event would

be limited to silver-rank power. Was it a factor of earth's low magical density or was it related to Jason himself? He searched through the system messages again.

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- You have established a spirit domain. Expanding your spirit domain will define and stabilise unstable genesis space but trigger anomalous reactions from genesis space outside the spirit domain.
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Did the anomaly appear as a reaction to Jason using his spirit vault power? It made sense to Jason that if the anomaly was triggered by his action, the resulting reaction would share his power level. It seemed likely that more of those things would appear as he attempted to stabilise the space, so hopefully, they wouldn't be much more powerful.

It had been very weak compared to most silver-rank monsters, falling into the variety that normally appeared in large packs and was severely lacking in fortitude. Even so, the bronze-rank sword had trouble piercing the creature's skin, forcing Jason to attack its more vulnerable insides. The anomalies that appeared in the future were likely to be far more numerous as he expanded the stable area and more of them spawned.

Jason looked to the door that had been shattered to splinters by the monster's entry. It was dark outside and without his perception power, the gloom obstructed his vision. The last thing he did before going out was taking the item he looted from the monster from his inventory to examine.

Item: [Stable Genesis Core] (unranked, common)

A refined vessel of transformative potential energy (consumable, magic core).

- Effect: Use to set up spiritual domains. Expanding spiritual domains requires additional cores based on the size of the spiritual domain.
 - You are in the vicinity of your spirit domain. Cost to expand: 1 [Stable Genesis Core]. Would you like to expand your spirit domain?
-

Jason declined for the moment but was satisfied to have what looked like a viable method to achieve his goal. He had come in with no solid idea of what to do but now there was a path ahead of him. As best he could determine, he would need to expand his spiritual domain using his spirit vault power, and then harvest the anomalies that attacked so he could expand it more.

Either he would need to completely convert the transformation space or maybe just reach some kind of threshold that stabilised it enough that a wound wasn't torn in the side

of reality. He just hoped that he could handle however many anomalies came at him while he didn't have his combat powers.

Putting away the core, he got to his feet and resheathed his sword, the blood and gore on it having dissolved into smoke. He made his way to the door to find what awaited him. He emerged into what looked like a hotel hallway, in the same state of disrepair as the room he just left had been. The transformation brought about by his spirit vault had stopped inside the room.

There was more peeling wallpaper and thin carpet with patches where the underlay or the floorboards underneath could be seen. There were fluorescent ceiling lights in the hall, most of which were dark. Only a few sporadically flickered, shedding intermittent light. If he had his shadow powers it would have been a welcome environment. Instead, he felt what he suspected others did when they knew he was out there, somewhere in the dark.

Rather than immediately try and expand his spirit domain, he decided to explore a little. After leaving the room he was no longer able to project his aura, so he was left relying on his mundane senses. He had two directions to go, right or left, and chose left at random. He tried some of the doors he passed but they were all locked. He didn't try breaking in.

As Jason moved further down the hall, he slowed and then stopped as a wrongness nagged at his senses. It was frustrating to be impaired by the dark for the first time in years and he was unsure what exactly had tripped his instincts. Looking around in the flickering light, he fixed on the walls, something about them not seeming quite right. He drew his sword and ran the tip gently along the wall, which scraped away the surface as if the walls were a façade; a wet, thickly layered painting of a wall rather than the wall itself.

He tried pushing his sword in deeper and it dug in with little resistance, but the reaction was immediate. The wall around his sword flinched like a living thing, drawing back and threatening to pull the sword from his hands. Pulling the sword free of the wall, he examined the blade to find it coated in a clay-like substance, mixed with what looked and smelled like blood. The wall returned to its original position, once more looking like a wall except for a hole leaking more blood.

Jason took some cautious steps forward and the patchy carpet started squelching underfoot, having become the same paint-like substance as the wall. He backed off, back onto actual carpet. Checking that he'd been passing through an actual hallway, he identified the point that ostensibly normal hallway gave way to a strange paint-flesh thing. Heading down the other way, he confirmed that in either direction, the hallway started

turning strange at points equidistant from his spirit domain, the room in which he had arrived.

Nothing else had attacked Jason during his exploration of the hallway, leading him to postulate that nothing would until he either expanded the spirit domain or delved further into the strange space beyond it. He stood outside the room he had arrived in, which was currently the extent of his spirit domain. Once more he took the stable genesis core from his inventory.

-
- You are in the vicinity of your spirit domain. Cost to expand: 1 [Stable Genesis Core]. Would you like to expand your spirit domain?
-

“Sure,” he said. Immediately the doorway started transforming from dilapidated wood into dark, smoky crystal. The effect spread along the walls, floor and ceiling, extending down the hall. The dead or flickering ceiling lights were replaced with glowing crystals that spread cool light down the hall. From the dim reaches beyond, Jason heard the sounds of movement.

Chapter 410

Needs of the Moment

His silver-rank attributes placed Jason firmly in the realm of superhuman, but attributes alone were only potential. If not used to their maximum potential they were being wasted, which was what differentiated the best adventurers from the worst. This was something Rufus, Gary and Farrah had repeated over and over during his training. From the very start, they had been looking not just further ahead than Jason but even beyond their own progress at the time. Jason was now stronger and more experienced than they had been at the time.

At iron-rank and even bronze, only specialists like Sophie engaged in wild acrobatics. At silver-rank, though, any essence user not moving like Spider-Man was squandering their potential. The might of the power attribute, fuelled by the recovery attribute, controlled by the speed attribute and guided by the spirit attribute. Just as essences formed a confluence, so did attributes combine into a greater whole.

With his essence abilities sealed away, it was the skill and discipline hammered into him by Rufus, Gary and Farrah that carried him through. Armed with an under-ranked sword marginally better than his bare hands, his only means to confront the living anomalies was pure fighting.

When Jason had used the first stable genesis core, his spirit domain had expanded outwards. The smoky glass with the glimmering internal light spread out from the room it had already taken over and both directions down the hallway. It stopped at the point where the normal hallway gave way to the bizarre materials Jason had already discovered.

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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: 0.008%.
-

Two anomaly creatures emerged, one from each end of the darkened hallway. Both were wildly different from the anomaly Jason already killed and each other, in both appearance and abilities. One scuttled across the ceiling like an insect, looking like an emaciated human with too many elbows and knees. It was fast but Jason knocked it off the wall before stomping and stabbing it to death in fairly short order.

➤ You have defeated [Living Anomaly].

It was frailer than any silver-rank entity he had encountered but its inherent silver-rank damage reduction shielded it from much of the sword's damage. Jason's ability to ignore rank disparity only extended to his own body and his currently-sealed powers.

The second anomaly was much harder to handle. It had human proportions but was featureless and androgynous. As he watched, it took on a more feminine body shape and launched itself at Jason with technique that he recognised. It moved the way he remembered Sophie moving and fought the way he remembered her fighting.

Fake Sophie's bronze-rank techniques were no match for Jason's silver-rank prowess as he defended himself from its attacks and quickly slashed the creature twice with his swords. Jason didn't doubt that Sophie was, like him, far stronger than when they had last seen each other.

Over time, Jason's fighting style had grown more offensive as he learned to incorporate more attacks without compromising his ability to evade or disappear into shadows. Although he would never come out swinging a club, there was more aggression in his techniques. Since Broken Hill and Makassar especially, the transition was not just a matter of technique but mentality.

Now that he was fighting without powers, he moved away from the finesse of his normal style to a more brutal approach. One of the benefits of having learned from skill books was having a broad suite of techniques to mix up his style. His fighting style, The Way of the Reaper, had a very mixed martial arts sensibility of versatility and adaptation.

Although Jason's speed and perception often made his fighting style seem like film choreography, that was when he had all his tools and powers at his command. Even pushing his silver-rank speed and strength to the limits, the living anomalies were silver-rank too. They might have been even weaker than equivalent-rank monsters but Jason was fighting them outnumbered, with what amounted to a sharp stick.

The second anomaly changed again, this time taking the shape of Rufus. Rufus's sword skill, even at bronze, was a match for Jason's. Still, Jason was able to leverage his superior attributes and slowly overwhelm the Rufus clone until it shifted again.

This time it was Farrah, bone splitting out through the creature skin to imitate her conjured armour. This fight swiftly proved futile for Jason. Unlike the Sophie and Rufus shapes, which reflected the bronze-rank powers Jason remembered, Jason remembered Farrah at her current strength. He was also unable to penetrate the armour with his sword.

Suspecting that the anomaly was turning his own memories into weapons, Jason decided to try something unconventional. Gaining distance, he cleared his mind. After years of magical meditation, he could quickly and easily focus his mind on a singular thing, which is exactly what he did. Jason's entire mind was consumed by a single image of the least dangerous thing he could imagine.

The anomaly stopped dead still as its shape shifted from that of Farrah to that of Thadwick Mercer. Jason had never actually seen Thadwick fight, but as he had hoped, Jason's disdain for Thadwick and his capabilities translated into the stolen shape. It even seemed to affect the creature's resilience as Jason's blade easily slid into its throat and it dropped dead.

Jason consumed the two cores he gained from those two anomalies to further expand his spirit domain, which spread far enough to claim each end of the hallway. Three anomalies appeared, all from the same direction this time and he became increasingly pressured as he fought them. After putting them all down, he took stock and explored the ends of the hallways.

The smoky crystal had overtaken the corridor, pushing back the strange gooey material the hall was otherwise made from. As he checked the new boundaries of his spirit domain, he found that one end of the hall ended in a stairwell going up and down. He quickly determined that he was on the fourth floor of a five-storey building.

A normal transformation zone maintained a close relation to the shape it had been in before being transformed. The pastoral plains this zone had covered had nothing remotely like a five-story hotel, dilapidated or not. Jason guessed that the transformation zone had been influenced by the proto-space it overlapped with.

With no idea of how long he had to accomplish his task, Jason was concerned. He was confident he could control how much he expanded his spirit domain and how many anomalies accordingly attacked by how many cores he used at once. With no idea of how long he had to stabilise the transformation zone, he felt the need to accelerate his pace but wasn't confident about taking on more than a few of the anomalies. Even if they were much weaker than equivalent-rank monsters, Jason was much weaker than an equivalent-rank essence user at that moment.

Checking the other end of the hallway, Jason found it looping around to other areas on the same floor. Not wanting to waste time, he decided to keep expanding the spirit domain at his current pace, facing two or three anomalies at a time. He hoped that something would change if he met some threshold of spirit domain size, giving him an exploitable advantage.

He could use his aura within the domain already, albeit without the effects of his aura power. If the domain grew large enough, perhaps even his powers could be restored. Then he could tear through the anomalies like the devil riding a bloody wind.

By the time he had claimed the entire fourth floor, he was not happy with his progress.

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- [Dread Salvation] transformation status: 32.6%.
 - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 0.098%.
-

He strongly suspected the evolution of his spirit vault was directly tied to his progress stabilising the zone. The minuscule percentage suggested he would need to accelerate. His only hope was his sword, which he hoped would open a new path. He moved up a floor and slogged his way through more anomalies to claim it for his spirit domain.

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- [Dread Salvation] transformation status: 68.2%.
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Another floor would likely do it but Jason wanted to stop for a break. Even without using powers and his silver-rank recovery attribute, Jason felt exhausted. With the top floor claimed, he wanted to survey his surroundings from the roof. His aura could extend to any point within his domain and he could feel the roof above with it so he knew the rooftop was now within his domain.

Making his way up the stairs and outside there was no sign of the dome that should have been blocking the daylight sky. Instead, the sky was dark and open, filled with unfamiliar stars forming unnerving, eldritch constellations. They reminded Jason vaguely of magical diagrams and he imagined any rituals based on them would be dark and twisted magic. Which probably meant he would end up with it, somehow.

The stars offered just enough light to make out vast silhouettes moving in the distance, monolithic and alien. Jason couldn't see well enough to make out what any of the shapes were but they towered like skyscrapers. They could just as easily be giant robots, kaiju or Lovecraftian horrors, their distant shapes so vague in the darkness.

"As long as they're not from Evangelion," he muttered to himself. "That show is way more messed up than Lovecraft."

Looking out at the vast space around him he probed the edges of the domain with his restored aura. With his experience working within node space he was able to get a sense of what was going on. The transformation space had inadvertently sliced open the astral

space and blended the reshaping of the physical reality with that of the astral space. Now they were entwined and neither was able to close.

His better understanding of the transformation zone brought good news and bad. The most critical thing was something of a clock on Jason stabilising the space. The astral space and the transformation zone spaces that had been blended together were slowly but sure destabilising. Eventually, both would collapse. The good news was that Jason could sense enough to know that it would take much longer than the two days a normal transformation remained sealed for. Even so, he knew that he would need to pick up the pace by a lot. Even if he had more time than expected, the expansion of the area due to the astral space's influence meant he had a lot of work to do.

Jason looked down at the sword on his hip. One more floor and it should complete whatever change it was undergoing. Although it was a growth item, the sword was stuck at bronze-rank until Gary reforged it. Ideally, the transformation would throw off the shackles of that limitation and allow it to rise to silver rank, thus becoming a more viable weapon. At the moment it was barely better than Jason's fists and feet.

If the sword became stronger, Jason could start using more stable genesis cores at a time. He already had a collection of the cores, having declined to escalate the expansion rate of the spirit domain with them. All that was left was to complete the sword transformation and see, so after a rest on the rooftop, he headed for the unclaimed third floor.

Worried about the amount of work ahead, Jason used enough cores to send five anomalies his way. He realised his mistake immediately as each anomaly was strange and unpredictable making each combat a new experience. He only killed the last one after it half swallowed him, leaving him severely injured. A fleshy ball, it had a giant, toothy mouth that shot out tendrils to grab him and drag him in to be consumed. His legs were chewed up and partially dissolved in digestive acid before he killed the creature and dragged himself out.

Jason lay on the floor of the newly extended portion of his spirit domain. Normally, after a fight, he would simply use his blood harvest power for massive recovery. It was a power he rather took for granted until it was gone. Having suffered enough damage than even Colin's regenerative power was taking time to heal him up.

Jason pulled out a tin of healing ointment and started rubbing it on his legs. It was one of the most common items any loot power produced, and while it was of little use to Jason and his many recovery powers, it was a reliable source of cash if he needed some quick coin. Healing items were always welcome and Jason accrued so many that he

donated most of them. In the other world he had handed them off to Jory's clinic, while in this one it was usually the Network or the Asano village's medical centre.

Rubbing the unguent on his wounds, bereft of powers, took Jason back to his arrival in Pallimustus. He recalled the shock and confusion he experienced, convinced he had gone insane as one impossibility after another piled up. Once more he found himself in a place he struggled to understand, fighting to stay alive and find some kind of path forward. He was even mostly pantsless again, his trousers having been all but destroyed by the creature chewing on his legs.

Recognising that massive downtime would not accelerate the end result, Jason went back to a slow and steady pace of slow expansion, fighting three or four anomalies at a time. Finally, as he had most of the third floor claimed, he got the result he'd been waiting for.

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- You have defeated [Living Anomaly].
 - Interaction with [Living Anomaly] has instigated random changes in weapon [Dread Salvation]. Further interaction will consolidate change.
 - Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised and refined changes to weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - [Dread Salvation] transformation status: 100%.
-

“Moment of truth.”

- Dread Salvation has undergone changes deeply affected by the powers of its wielder.
-

Jason looked at the simple message.

“Huh.”

He held out his sword to examine it.

Item: [Dread Salvation] (bronze rank [growth], legendary)

A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope of it being the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was bound to its wielder and his powers by extreme and unusual forces; it carries the arrogance of one who would remake reality in his own image. Due to the lacking craftsmanship, most of its potential is sealed until the original craftsman demonstrates his growth by reforging the weapon (weapon, sword).

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else. This bond allows the weapon to share the wielder's ability to ignore rank disparity.

- Effect: You may imbue your aura into the weapon, increasing its damage for an ongoing mana cost. Damage and cost scales with the amount of aura strength imbued, up to the limitations of the weapon's current state. Aura strength over that required for the maximum damage output reduces the mana cost.
 - Current rank: Bronze.
 - Current maximum damage increase: Moderate.
 - Current maximum mana cost: Low. Decreased from moderate by wielder's aura strength. Mana cost cannot be eliminated entirely, regardless of the wielder's aura strength.
 - Effect: ??? (Sealed).
 - Growth conditions (silver): Sealed.
 - [Dread Salvation] has reached the maximum potential of its current form. It must be reforged by the original craftsman in order to advance further.
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Jason read over the changes to his weapon. It had lost its old abilities but that was not a concern, given their limited value to him. He suspected that the sword bonding to him somehow recognised that and changed accordingly, changing into a state that met the extreme needs of the moment. Even in its current sealed state, the weapon was far more useful.

- You have three soul-bonded items. You qualify to use the [Soul-Imprinting Triune].
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It was an item he had looted from the intelligent gold-rank monster, King. It was something he had been unable to use, thus languished in his inventory. Now that had changed and he pulled the item out to examine it.