

Chapter 446

The Upstart Magician

“The necromancer was surprisingly easy to get on board,” Jason said. “It’s likely that the powers we’ve seen are the extent of his unlocked abilities.”

“Perhaps,” Mr North said. “Or perhaps he wasn’t so much eager to join our side as to leave the one he was on. It takes an unusual gold-rank vampire to put aside their instinct to dominate and get along with each other, which is not a good environment for a disempowered silver-rank essence user. You sensed his aura; the necromancer is a lot more desperate than he lets on.”

Jason nodded. They were still resting in Jason’s futuristic underground city after slogging through the angelic domain of the messengers. That domain was a ring around the space previously belonging to the necromancer and now surrendered to Jason. Its perpetual daylight was a cage, trapping the vampires inside it.

The original astral space had been perfect for vampires; the bleak, sunless light had been harmless. Now everything had changed and high-magic sunlight would severely weaken them, rendering them vulnerable to anomalies, let alone people like Jason and Mr North.

The necromancer had already explained his experiences in the transformation zone under questioning from Jason and Mr North. They were reflective of Jason’s experiences in the first transformation zone. He had awoken alone and discovered that his abilities were sealed right before being attacked by anomalies.

He was able to handle the early, weak anomalies and, like Jason, he had a looting power. Humans received a racial gift evolution from each essence they awakened and the necromancer’s death essence evolved a looting power that let him claim the spoils of death.

The looting power was how the necromancer had managed to reach silver-rank over the years, cutting deals with smaller Network branches. Always at the mercy of the International Committee and the larger branches for resources, there was no shortage of groups looking to trade monster cores for the use of a loot power.

This looting power led to the necromancer, like Jason before him, discovering the stable genesis cores. Using them, the necromancer claimed his first territory. When expanding into his second, he found ghouls and vampires alike locked in some kind of stasis. Using his knowledge of necromantic ritual magic, he was able to awaken the

ghouls, gaining control of them in the process and using them to fully claim his second territory.

He had not intended to wake the vampires but the power of the anomalies grew with each territory. In the third territory, the power of the anomalies was enough that even thousands of ghouls would have been chewed through eventually. The orb from the greater anomaly in the second territory had awoken the power to drain the necromantic energy from the ghouls and use it as a weapon. The ghouls were a finite resource, however, making it no more efficient than letting the anomalies kill them.

The vampires he had found in elaborate coffins, underground in a crypt. He decided to awaken them to help him handle the increasingly dangerous anomalies while recognising the danger the bloodsuckers themselves represented. He had hoped that he could control them like the ghouls, but he went in knowing that they were likely too powerful for that. The ghouls were inherently subservient to necromantic commands, which was how the vampires controlled them. Vampires, on the other hand, were made to rule.

After some internal debate, he had chosen to awaken all five vampires at once. He knew that even if he woke just one, he would still not be its match and it would likely kill the others and control him. By waking all five, they would be warier of each other than him. His leverage was that they would need him, so none would allow any of the others to fully control him, which granted him a measure of agency.

The fact that vampires could not naturally manipulate mana like an essence user meant they were unable to use the genesis cores to claim territories. This gave the necromancer more leverage and his role had been to open new domains. He would lead the anomalies back to the Necromancer's core domain where the power of the vampires could handle them.

The necromancer's territory was a land of perpetual night, much as the messenger territory was one of perpetual day. This suited the vampires perfectly. This methodology allowed the necromancer to claim his third territory with ease, but then they encountered the messengers.

Not only was it a realm of clear skies and sunlight, but the anomalies were far more powerful than ever before. With each territory, they had grown stronger but this went from a step up to a soaring leap. Only after speaking with Jason did he realise that Jason's domain was now adjacent to the messenger territory and the anomaly strength was based on that. With seven territories claimed, the enemies were naturally much more powerful.

Jason was able to transfigure even the surrendered territory of the necromancer but had not yet done so. He was waiting until after attempting to recruit the vampires for that. If nothing else, he couldn't be certain what being in the transfiguration area would do to them, although he suspected it would be lethal.

Jason could sense the necromancer roaming about the underground city and sent a Shade that he then shadow-jumped through.

"I wouldn't have expected it to be so big," the necromancer said. They were in a public area that was a massive internal space across a half-dozen levels, like a giant mall. Metal surfaces were everywhere, in silvery steel, along with smoothly polished stone. Slightly red-tinted lights lit up the cavernous space.

"Time to go," Jason said.

"Do you always go around with that hood up?" the necromancer asked, looking at him.

"I'm not sure a guy in a purple coat who calls himself 'The Necromancer,' should be casting chuuni stones."

"What's a chuuni stone?"

Jason shook his head, pulled his hood back to reveal his face and gripped the Necromancer's upper arm.

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- **Todd 'The Necromancer' Halverson.**
 - **Essence user (human, silver rank).**
 - **Essence ability advancement impediment (monster core taint): 94%.**
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Darkness emerged from Jason's shadow to take the form of a sinister black golf cart.

"Get on the golf cart, Todd."

Jason, Mr North and Todd the necromancer were in a car driving through the now-empty streets of the messenger city.

"What can we expect from the vampires?" Jason asked.

"I'm not sure," Todd said. "Your aura will have replaced mine in blanketing my domain, right? Combined with that ring of sunlight around the outside, they'll probably be agitated. I don't think we should be dealing with a bunch of ancient, agitated vampires."

"We won't be," Jason said. "I will."

They found Todd's ghoul army standing around where he left them. Compared to their normal, barely-controllable ravenousness, they stood as if in a daze. They were

located where they had fought the greater anomaly, next to the border between the messenger territory and that of Todd's former domain. The car pulled to a stop in front of them.

"If we end up fighting the vampires, I can't contribute without the ghouls," Todd said.

"We aren't fighting the vampires," Jason said. "We're just going to talk. If I can get them on board, I'll bring them out. Otherwise, I'll transfigure the whole space they're in and see what that does to them."

"I would advise against lying," Todd said. "The vampire's aura sensitivity is high and they're very powerful. They'll know if you aren't telling them the truth."

The dividing line between the two territories was stark, despite both being part of Jason's domain now. Looking up into the sky, there was a line where the blue sky suddenly transitioned to black night, the sunlight stopping dead. In the realm of darkness, the ground was dark soil, devoid of life. Black, purple and grey ziggurats and towers punctuated the landscape, their architecture gothic and almost organic.

"Looks like territory claimed by the undead faction in a strategy game," Jason said.

"I know, right?" Todd said. "So badass."

Jason pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Is this what I sound like to other people?" Jason asked Mr North.

"More or less."

"Bugger."

Mr North walked up to the border, stepping back and forth over it as he looked around.

"How very unusual," he observed. "Are you going to send your familiar to speak by proxy, Mr Asano? That would be safest."

"No need," Jason said. "They're already watching us. And listening."

"Oh? I don't sense them."

"They're in my domain, now," Jason said. "I've known where they were at every moment since Todd surrendered his territories."

Five figures emerged from behind nearby buildings. They looked warily at the sunlit other side as they approached the border but their auras gave away no emotions. One was wearing what looked like a period costume, much like the vampire Farrah and Dawn fought in Australia. The other three male vampires wore modern, exquisitely-tailored suits in black, black and black. The solitary woman wore a formal but contemporary ball gown of vibrant red. Somehow, it had remained immaculately clean.

One of the suited vampires spoke as they drew close to the border where night met day.

“You’ve turned coat, Necromancer.”

“For the moment,” Jason said, “there is only one side. We all live or die together.”

The vampires dismissed the necromancer. With his lack of power, without his domain and with his clear subordination to Jason, he vanished from the vampires' attention. That was instead turned directly onto Jason.

The vampires could not cross the border without being weakened but the same could not be said for their auras. Five overbearing gold rank auras pressed over and onto Jason. His eyes glowed brightly as he drew on his aura which suffused the entire domain. Even the five gold rank auras were pressed like boats before a tsunami, crashing back so forcefully that the vampires were literally staggered.

“Make no mistake,” Jason said. “Your choice is not join or fight. It's join or die.”

“Join what?” the female vampire asked. “Who are you?”

“My name is Jason Asano.”

“The upstart magician,” one of the suited vampires said. “You were behind the events in Great Moravia.”

“Great Moravia?” Jason asked.

“Slovakia,” the female vampire said. “Do try and learn the new names, Wassily.”

“Andrei said it was Great Moravia. Russian imbecile.”

“I thought you were Russian,” the vampire next to him said.

“I'm Polish.”

“Isn't that basically the same thing?”

“I'LL KILL YOU, YOU SON OF A DOG!”

With a flash of gold-rank speed, Wassily had the other vampire gripped by the jacket.

“Wassily,” Elizabeth said. Her softly spoken word was carried on a wave of aura that stopped Wassily dead.

“Fine,” Wassily spat, shoving the other vampire away.

“You got lucky, Wassily,” the vampire said.

“That's enough,” Elizabeth said. “From you as well, Klaus.”

“Who even cares what the place is called, Elizabeth?” Wassily asked, returning to the previous topic. “The names will change when we divide the lands between ourselves.”

“I would advise against counting unearned spoils,” Elizabeth said and turned back to Jason.

“Did you cause all this to happen to destroy our operations, here?” she asked.

“No,” Jason said. “I did come here to sabotage your operations, but not like this. One of my enemies thought they could eliminate us all together while I was in here, not realising what their actions would bring about. The events here threaten to destroy the entire world.”

“It isn’t possible to destroy the world,” one of the vampires said. “Nothing has that much power.”

“Not only is it possible,” Jason said, “but I’m not even certain it’s avoidable. Have you ever gone to a high-up point and looked deep into the gloom beyond claimed territory?”

“Giant shapes in the dark,” Elizabeth said.

“That is what awaits us at the end,” Jason said. “I don’t know what they are, but that’s what we’ll have to deal with. I barely held things together the last time, in Slovakia, and I never went as far as finding and confronting whatever waits at the end. That time, because I didn’t finish the job, the world was shaken.”

“The increase in magic across the world,” Elizabeth said.

“Yes. The world cannot take another shake like that. If you want there to be a world left to rule, you need to add your strength and ours. There is also a powerful essence-user somewhere in here, and even altogether, we may not be enough.”

Jason felt the eyes of the vampires on him. Their auras did not attack again but they picked over his own, looking for the telltale inconsistencies of deceit. They sensed the strength with which he restrained his emotions, terrifyingly strong for his rank. They could taste his frustration at needing their help and being forced to ask for it. The anger at being forced to let them go in return for their assistance when he would never have a better circumstance to fight them instead. They sensed him direct the same feeling at Todd beside him.

“Do you intend to betray us, Jason Asano?” Elizabeth asked directly.

“No,” Jason said. The frustration at his need to make a deal edged past his best attempts to mask his emotions.

“I cannot speak for the others,” Elizabeth said, “but I will participate in this endeavour.”

Chapter 447

Too Much Over Pride

The lone female vampire was seemingly the one most feared by the other vampires. After she agreed to join Jason in his conquest of the transformation zone, the four males looked at her and went off by themselves to discuss. From their expressions, the discussion was forceful and unfriendly. In the end, two chose to throw in with Jason while the last two refused. One of the refusers was Wassily.

“What is it you think you can accomplish?” Jason asked them. “You have no power, here. You’re at the mercy of forces larger than yourself.”

“You think that you’re a power greater than me?” Wassily asked.

“No,” Jason said. “But I’ve taken control of some of the power here. Enough that the ground you’re standing on belongs to me.”

“Then come over here and show me your power, little boy. Or are you afraid to step into the dark?”

Jason shook his head.

“I’ve risked too much over pride too many times,” he said sadly. “It always ends up being others who pay the price. I’m done risking the fate of the world for my own short-sighted goals. So, if I have to work with the man who killed my brother I’ll do it. If the price of saving everyone is letting you people walk away, I’ll do that too. I came here to shut down your operation and that’s done. I can live with waiting to kill you down the line.”

“This is not the place to make a stand, Wassily,” Elizabeth said. “There is too much going on here that we don’t understand. We’ve waited centuries to rule this world. You can wait a few days until this boy is no longer protected by the power he wields here.”

“Do you truly believe the world is in danger? The entire world. That’s as nonsensical as it being a sphere.”

“Wait,” Jason said. “You’re a flat-Earther? Oh, crap; you’re all super-old.”

“What do you mean, the world is a sphere?” the other refuser asked.

“Of course it’s not a sphere,” Wassily said. “If it was a sphere, people would fall off the bottom. That anyone believes that nonsense is a reflection of what happens when peasants run around without a firm hand at the tiller.”

“As much as I want to dive into this,” Jason said, “and I really, really do, there are more important things at hand. Shade, if you would?”

Darkness streamed from Jason's shadow, moved across the border into the night zone and transformed into three carriages, each tethered to black horses with glowing white manes and hooves.

"Those will protect you from the sun as we return to the heart of my domain," Jason said. "Anyone who remains behind will most likely die, and die soon."

The three vampires who chose to join were Elizabeth, Klaus and Georges. Jason had provided a carriage for each, both to avoid further conflict and to isolate them within the group. The carriages and the mystical horse-forms that drew them were shadow-stuff, made from Shade's bodies. They moved across the ground at blistering speed, largely ignoring the terrain. They were blacked out entirely to shield their occupants from the sun and Jason had timed their approach so that they returned to his core domain early in the night.

The celestines once again emerged at Jason's arrival but Jason had Shade usher them back inside before letting any of his new allies out. The necromancer looked up at the eye floating over the pagoda.

"You know that looks just like—"

"I know what it looks like," Jason said.

Jason left his guests in the mezzanine lounge and ascended to the top floor. He took his usual place on the balcony and triggered the transfiguration of his new territories: the messenger territory and those surrendered by the necromancer.

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- You have claimed sufficient territory to stabilise the transformation zone and separate it from the convergent astral space.
 - Separating the space with the current territory will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the surrounding reality. Claim additional territory to reduce the severity of this effect. Current severity reduction: 88.9%
 - Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?
-

"No."

It had to be a hundred percent. It was the only reason he would tolerate the people downstairs when he wanted nothing more than to kill them all.

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "Mr North has requested to come up and speak to you."

"Fine."

Jason could sense everything inside his spirit domain, including Mr North standing on the elevating platform, which he mentally ordered to ascend. While he waited, he closed

his eyes. His vision extended out and he surveyed one of his new territories, which was a land under a perpetual eclipse.

The macabre ziggurats and gothic towers of the necromancer's former territory were now alien and crystalline, glowing with eerie internal light. The dead earth was now covered in low plants that glowed with luminescent foliage. It was strange but beautiful.

Jason had chosen to look at that spot because he could sense the two vampires that had refused to join. He had been wrong in thinking the vampires would die, but could tell from their auras that they were changed. Like the gold-ranker, Tran, the vampires had been claimed by unstable energy and transformed into anomalies. One was a hulking grotesque of unliving flesh, twice the size of a man and grossly misshapen. This was Wassily, although none of his former personality was evident on his new face.

Wassily's face made plain the nature that the beauty of a vampire hid: power and hunger; the need to devour. The other vampire was similarly reflective of this, but in a very different way. The other vampire had turned into a cluster of blood ticks, each the size of a dining table. Only from their shared aura could Jason tell that they were a unified creature and the new form of the vampire.

The auras of the former vampires were altered but recognisable. To Jason's senses, their auras were more vampiric than vampires. These were vampires with their veneers removed; their humanity stripped away to leave only the monstrous aspect.

Jason was not taken aback by the distillation of their vampiric thirst. For all its clarity, it paled in comparison to the familiar living inside Jason. Compared to the apocalyptic hunger of a sanguine horror, even the most clarified vampiric thirst was laughable.

Sensing the approach of Shade and Mr North, Jason opened his eyes, his perception returning to the pagoda. He turned from the balustrade to face the approaching pair and Mr North stopped, giving Jason an assessing look.

"You know that I was already gold rank when I came to this world, Mr Asano. I've seen great adventurers in the other world."

"So?" Jason asked.

"The essence users of this world are garbage, as you know. The Americans and the Chinese are adequate, but under the guidance of Dawn and Miss Hurin, you've surpassed them in your time here. Once you return to my homeworld, you'll be able to go around without embarrassing yourself, but don't expect the kind of advantages you have here. Try taking on someone above your rank and you'll meet the Reaper without knowing what happened."

"I know," Jason said. "I thought it would be amazing to be a famous hero, but I was naïve. Again. It's not clean. The situations are ugly and so are the solutions. People see things how they want to, even when the truth is both completely different and blindingly obvious."

Mr North smiled.

"Yes, they do."

"I'm looking forward to being just some guy again," Jason said.

"I think, perhaps, you're still a little naïve, Mr Asano. I don't think you're as past playing hero as you like to tell yourself, even if you should be."

"What did you come here for, Mr North?"

"I just told you that you shouldn't expect to be exceptional, but there is one area in which you are."

"Aura strength, I know."

"No. Well, yes, but that's not the point I'm making. The strength speaks to what you've endured, but not your capability. I'm talking about the remarkable deftness with which you use such a powerful weapon."

"Aura manipulation."

"Yes. Who taught you?"

"Farrah. I picked up some more from others along the way. Dawn, my friend Craig."

"The vampire?"

"Yes."

"Very smart. Not many in the other world get a chance to learn from them as vampires aren't exactly tolerated. And a diamond ranker, and not just any. Your aura manipulation is truly something to be proud of, Mr Asano. Gold-rank vampires are nothing to sneeze at. Their instinctive knack for certain aspects of aura use has confounded many an essence user. Lying to their faces, at a rank below them, no less? The picture you painted them with your aura was true artistry."

"Is that why you came up here? To compliment me for being a good liar?"

"I'm advising you to lean into that strength, in the other world. Your peers will be highly capable, and you're a decent all-rounder, but every all-rounder needs something to set them apart. If you want to be truly great, leverage that advantage. Bring it into everything you do."

"Auras have their uses, but they aren't applicable in every situation."

"Not with that attitude. As it stands, you're wasting that strength."

"So, you didn't come here to compliment me. You came to tell me I suck."

“I came to remind you to be vigilant. Don’t let the vampires know your true intentions.”

Jason took a step forward.

“What do you know of my true intentions?” he asked, his voice turning icy.

“Mr Asano, I knew how this was going to end from the moment I was trapped in this place.”

“Do I have to kill you, Mr North?”

“No, Mr Asano. You just want to.”

They looked at each other in silence for a long time.

“Shade, take Mr North back downstairs.”

Shade led North away again and Jason turned back to the railing, closing his eyes.

Once again, his vision moved to the dark realm under the eclipse and the two former vampires. They were no moving together and seemed to be roaming the empty territory, looking for a means to assuage their hunger. They were moving roughly in the direction of the heart of his domain, although they would take a vast amount of time to reach it at their current pace.

“What do you think, Shade?” Jason asked.

“I cannot see what you see, Mr Asano, but I assume you are checking on the vampires who neglected to join us.”

“They aren’t vampires anymore.”

“I recall you saying something about taking risks over pride.”

“This isn’t the same fight,” Jason said. “I don’t think they have any intelligence left. Even if I can’t win, I’m confident I can escape.”

“Can you win?” Shade asked.

“I think so.”

“Then we should go.”

“Yeah? Not the answer I was expecting.”

“Caution is not about avoiding battles, Mr Asano. It’s about choosing them.”

“Alright, then. Let’s go kill a Polish ex-vampire.”

Jason opened a portal arch and stepped through.

There were eight of the giant blood ticks and they moved quickly. Their flesh was soft but they had praying mantis-like arm blades of incredibly hard chitin. If not for the swarm of Shade bodies that spread out, their numbers and skittering speed would have overwhelmed Jason in short order. One of Shade’s bodies was set off towards the other

former vampire, racing along the ground in the form of a horse at speeds that would shame a motorcycle.

Jason kept his other familiars unmanifested for the moment as he shadow-jumped to reposition, dodge and strike. He had two of Gordon's orbs around him to turn into shields and intercept attacks. They were hammered by arm blades and were not enough to intercept every attack but they shielded Jason from the worst hits.

Jason's life drain and health regeneration abilities were in full swing as he made attacks and cast spells to lay his afflictions on everything. The gold-rank ticks were weaker individually than a gold-rank monster but as a cluster, they posed a significant threat to Jason. This was demonstrated when a blade arm shattered one of his orb shields and an immediate follow-up severed his arm, just below the shoulder.

Straps of bloody leather shot out from Jason's robe, grabbed the loose arm and pulled it back into place.

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- Familiar [Sanguine Horror] has consumed significant biomass to reattach your arm.
 - Familiar can reconstitute biomass over time when subsumed into the summoner or by making life drain attacks.
-

The early parts of the fight were even hairier than Jason had anticipated, but the ticks grew weaker with every passing moment. His rigor mortis affliction slowed down both the physical and the healing speed of the monsters, even as their bodies were increasingly ravaged. Their gold rank bodies seemed almost impervious to Jason's afflictions in the beginning, but their exponential growth was inexorable.

Meanwhile, Jason was trying something new. In addition to his usual evasion tactics, he was more actively trying to use his aura to feint. It was something new and inexpertly applied, but several times it helped him dodge an attack that otherwise would have hit, or land an attack that would have missed.

The first tick finally fell, then a second and a third. The transcendent light of his execute spell savaged them but didn't eradicate the corpses entirely, the way it did with most enemies. Even though transcendent damage ignored rank and defences, Jason's silver-rank power could only fuel it so much. Once more, he was astounded at what felt like the indestructibility of even weak gold-rank enemies. It was only when the final tick fell that the former vampire truly died. Like the spider anomaly boss Jason had fought, only by killing all of it was it truly dead.

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- You have defeated [Reality-Dysphoric Anomaly].

Jason didn't waste time, immediately using blood harvest to drain the remnant life force from the dead ticks, ramping up his speed and recovery power. He then shadow-jumped to the Shade he sent after the other vampiric anomaly, kilometres away.

The ogrish monster proved the easier fight because it was alone and not fast for a gold-rank, while Jason was now boosted to near gold-rank levels of speed. His blood powers were effective against it and Jason pulled out his other familiars, giving him the edge in numbers.

Even so, there was no such thing as an easy fight against a gold-rank anything. Jason took a couple of square hits that send him flying like a cricket ball, his muscle mashed and his bones broken. He had to recall Colin to consume more of his biomass before the hulking former vampire capitalised and devoured Jason altogether. When the brute was finally on the verge of death, Jason called Colin back out to replenish itself by gorging on the vampire.

➤ You have defeated [Reality-Dysphoric Anomaly].

Chapter 448

Trust All the Way

Jason was painted red, both from his own blood and that of his enemies. He ignored it for the moment as he pulled a clear crystal orb from his inventory.

Item: [Genesis Reclamation Core] (transcendent rank, legendary)

A magical vessel capable of reclaiming the energy of unseated reality cores (consumable, magic core).

- **Effect:** Can drain the energy from unseated reality cores, as well as individuals and objects that have consumed that energy. When completely charged, this item will transmute into a [Regenes Core].

Touching it to what was left of the vampire after transcendent damage and a very hungry Colin got to it, rainbow energy started to spill inside. Once it stopped, Jason tried to loot the creature, which dissolved into rainbow smoke.

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- **These remains have been drained of all magical energy. They cannot be looted.**

Only after moving back to the dead ticks was he able to drain more energy and completely fill the orb.

Item: [Regenes Core] (transcendent rank, legendary)

Can serve as the basis of a reality construct (crafting material, magic core).

- **Effect:** Can be used as a basis for creating constructs that blend physical and astral components, such as dimensional vessels.

Jason had around twenty of the empty reclamation cores. He had intended to farm vampires to charge them, in the hopes that they would help him stabilise the node space or repair the effects of transformation zones. Instead, they would help him build the bridge between worlds, using the existing link as a basis once he had repaired it.

He understood the means to do so instinctively, courtesy of the bridge device that had been Dawn's parting gift. Like the Builder's magic door and the eye of doom, or even his essences, it was an item that he had absorbed into his soul.

The regenes cores were better than nothing but he was a little disappointed. The number of orbs he would need to fill was not worth the time it would take to hunt a

sufficient number of vampires. He could hunt down reality core stockpiles to accelerate the process, but the latest transformation zone had finally taught Jason the lesson he had failed to learn over and over. It was time to stop being distracted and dedicate himself only to repairing the link between worlds.

“Not everything works out quite right, I guess,” he told himself. He had never run around draining vampires to enhance his strength the way that Dawn had wanted him to, either. Events simply overtook him. Even so, the number and difficulty of the fights in the transformation zones had been effective in once more pushing his abilities forward.

Putting the orb away, Jason portalled back to the pagoda.

The vampires in Jason’s mezzanine lounge, Elizabeth, Klaus and Georges, had been waiting while Jason was upstairs, or so they thought. Their aura senses were unable to penetrate the walls, floors and ceilings of the pagoda, which left them uneasy and on edge.

It also meant that they were unaware that Jason had left, come back and was showering off the blood of their former vampiric rivals upstairs. Shade had led the necromancer and Mr North to individual suites in the mid-levels, leaving the vampires alone.

“I don’t like this,” Georges said. “It feels like we’re handing all the power to this infant magician.”

“We’re not handing him the power,” Elizabeth said. “If he didn’t have the power already, he’d be a drained-out husk right now.”

“He won’t go out during the day because we’re no use to him, in that case,” Klaus said. “With no sunlight for him to hide in, we take him together. Whatever extra power this place gives him, it can only be so much. Otherwise, why would he need us?”

“We also need him,” Elizabeth said. “Not only does he have power over this place but also knowledge of its rules. If nothing else, this strange realm may well collapse without him.”

“You don’t believe this threat to the entire world nonsense,” Klaus said.

“Look at the world we’ve returned to,” Elizabeth said. “Even those without magic have power that was unimaginable in our time. They can fire a weapon from a boat at sea that can destroy a castle. Iron birds carrying people across continents. Talking to someone on the far side of the world as if they were standing next to you. Then there is the magic. It’s everywhere, now, and even if we do not wish to admit it, some of these new magicians are stronger than us.”

“We have the numbers,” Klaus said.

“No we don’t,” Elizabeth said. “In the old days, only the strongest mattered. That is no longer the case, which is why we worked with the necromancer to create so many ghouls.”

She got to her feet.

“I’m going to smooth things over with Asano,” she said.

“Smooth things out?” Klaus asked.

“Are you fool enough to believe he isn’t listening to every word we say?” Elizabeth asked. “Plots and schemes are for behind closed doors, and this place has none. Not to him.”

Jason was meditating, sitting cross-legged and floating at standing height above the top floor balcony.

-
- Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) has reached Silver 3 (100%).
 - Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) has advanced to Silver 4 (00%).
-

Although he hadn’t been draining vampires, Jason’s abilities had continued to advance. The challenges of the transformation space had advanced his abilities, although there was a definitive wall. After the early growth, things had slowed at silver three. Once they reached silver four, though, slow became all but a stop. On achieving that level, the advancement of each power came to a slamming halt, like a baby thrown at a wall.

Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: silver
- Progression to gold rank: 30%

Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Silver 3].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Silver 3].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Silver 3].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Silver 3].

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

- [Party Interface].
- [Defiant].
- [Spirit Domain].
- [Tactical Map].
- [Nirvanic Transfiguration].

- [Dark Rider].

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (5/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Silver 4] 02%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Silver 4] 01%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Silver 3] 87%.
- [Hand of the Reaper] (special ability): [Silver 3] 39%.
- [Shadow of the Reaper] (familiar): [Silver 3] 88%.

Blood [Power] (5/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Silver 3] 41%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Silver 3] 67%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Silver 3] 11%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Silver 3] 18%.
- [Haemorrhage] (spell): [Silver 3] 13%.

Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Silver 3] 59%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Silver 3] 08%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Silver 3] 03%.
- [Hegemony] (aura): [Silver 4] 00%.
- [Castigate] (spell): [Silver 3] 04%.

Doom [Spirit] (5/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Silver 3] 89%.
- [Punition] (spell): [Silver 3] 54%.
- [Blade of Doom] (spell): [Silver 3] 79%.
- [Verdict] (spell): [Silver 3] 12%.
- [Avatar of Doom] (familiar): [Silver 3] 14%.

Jason had always been warned about the wall he would hit at silver rank. The transformation zone had pushed him hard and gotten him to the current stage, but it looked like he had reached his limit. There would be little more meaningful advancement without years of grinding, which was a task for the other world.

He opened his eyes, again regretting leaving Farrah behind. He had done so for stealth concerns, which was hardly a factor at the moment. He had told himself over and over that it was the right decision with the available information, but had a feeling she wouldn't see it that way.

Farrah looked from the deck of the cloud boat, her eyes panning over the dome in the distance, as they had a hundred times every day since it appeared.

"I am going to kick that idiot square in the..."

Elizabeth moved in her ball gown like she was floating. With her pale skin, red lips, delicate features and midnight hair, she was every bit the vampire. Her face might have lacked the polished perfection of an essence user but her slight smile and smouldering eyes held the seductive promise of sultry intelligence. She was led out to the balcony by Shade to where Jason was sitting, floating in the air. He uncrossed his legs and set his feet on the floor.

“I realise that the other vampires are more rivals than companions,” he said, “but I would like for you to get them settled. You clearly have primacy amongst them.”

“Easier said than done,” Elizabeth said. “I am part of what puts them ill at ease. When there were four others, they had the confidence to eliminate me if united. With only two, certainty becomes insecurity.”

“Just do your best. I intend to continue resting for the day and move when the night comes again, out of deference to your requirements.”

“Thank you,” she said. “There is something I would like to discuss with you in private, which is why I’ve come to see you.”

“Go on.”

“I think you intend to kill us all.”

“I figured that out,” Jason said. “The big clue was when you asked me if I was going to kill you all. You think I was lying when I said no.”

“Yes, but I couldn’t sense that you were. Every instinct told me that you were telling the truth. That scares me.”

“You’re afraid of little old me?”

“You are an aspect of a larger concern. This new world has too many secrets and too much power. Now that the core ghoul expansion and blood enhancement projects have been put paid to, my expectations for vampiric victory have been diminished. Not to mention, I have no idea how many more like you are running around.”

“There’s not many,” Jason said. “It’s basically just me and Tom Selleck. You’re looking to switch sides.”

“I’m strong and have valuable information. I also know I won’t be the first to join the human cause. The old factions have fractured and new ones are being formed. I believe there is a place for me in this new world, so long as I let go of ideas about the old one.”

“That’s a lot of humility for one of the old vampires.”

“I grew up as a woman in a time and place where that meant being utterly without power. I know how to persevere.”

“So, you want me to spare you. You’re confident that I can kill you.”

“I’m a practitioner of vampiric blood magic. It’s not the same as the magic you use, but there are enough similarities that I’ve been able to learn things since awakening. I have some sense of the forces at work and how small we are before them. I believe that they could destroy this world, should they choose to. If you can control even the smallest measure of that power, that is not wise to stand against.”

“You put me in an awkward position, Miss Elizabeth. If I accept your offer, I’m as good as admitting to having plans to kill you. If I reject it, you’ll assume I intend to kill you and be an unreliable ally.”

“The assumption is made, either way, Jason Asano. You may as well take the path that benefits you.”

“It’s that simple? If you get out of here, you promise to join team human?”

“I can offer you some assurance. I have a form of blood magic. It allows me to maintain a blood crystal that will attract my soul and create a new body for it should this one be destroyed. There’s a price, of course, but when death is the alternative, what would you not surrender?”

“I can think of a few things.”

“My preference is to stow the crystal in a safe location, but we are short on those right now.”

“So, you want me to let you stash it somewhere.”

She took a red, finger-sized crystal from her dress; Jason wasn’t sure where exactly, not seeing any pockets. She held it out for him to take.

“Since my only recourse is to trust you,” she said, “I may as well trust all the way and try to reap the benefits. I hope you don’t think the other vampires joined you humans from a moral imperative.”

“I’ve been a fool more than once, but not that much of a fool. Joining the human side is not the same as joining me, though,” Jason said. “I am not a part of the human factions. I’m not human at all.”

“I’d wondered,” she said. “Your aura isn’t right for a human. I thought it was something to do with your magic, but my instincts were right. Even so, you came here on behalf of the humans.”

“A mistake I will not repeat.”

Jason took the crystal, still proffered in her hand.

Item: [Blood Rebirth Crystal] (gold rank, conjured)

The rebirth stone of a vampire, crafted with blood magic (conjured, tool).

- Effect: Allows a vampire to revive from bodily destruction at greatly diminished power.

“This is quite the trusting gesture,” Jason said.

“I don’t see as I have an alternative.”

“Very well. Do you have a last name, Elizabeth?”

“I did, long ago. I discarded the name and the memories that went with it, long before you were born.”

“Then I will leave it be.”

“Thank you. If I may ask, before I return to the lower floor, do you know what became of the others who chose not to join us?”

“They survived the transfiguration of my domain, but they were changed by it. Turned into mindless creatures of hunger.”

“They are still out there, then?”

“No,” Jason said as he leaked a little of Colin’s aura from within him. “There are things hungrier than vampires, Elizabeth.”

The equanimity on her face was broken for the first time as her eyes slightly widened.

“I have to wonder, Jason Asano, if there isn’t something inside you more terrible than all of us.”

“I wonder that myself, sometimes. It’s time for you to...”

He trailed off as he felt something shake his domain, although the vampire sensed nothing.

-
- A nascent spirit domain has expanded into your spirit domain. This has turned your border territory into a contested zone.
 - Claiming a contested territory requires the defeat of the other domain holder. Defeat can take to form of surrender or death. Extended absence from the border territory will constitute a surrender.

“Asano?”

He strode past her. In the direction of the elevating platform.

“Come with me,” he ordered. “It seems that Mr Gerling has chosen our timeline for us.”

Chapter 449

Time to Choose

“This is different,” Gerling said. “I can feel it.”

Gerling and his team were in a city of graceful, narrow spires and islands floating in the air on beds of cloud. Bridges connected the floating islands to each other, while columns of light connected them to the ground, with elevating platforms that rose up and disappeared into the clouds.

The streets were bright and clean, with white marble buildings and roads of dark crystal flagstones. Trees lined the streets, their branches almost sagging with the weight of peaches and plums.

“It’s like heaven,” said Bennett, Gerling’s chief offside.

“Right down to the absence of anomalies,” Barbou said. “Gerling, can you sense any?”

“This isn’t my domain, so my senses don’t blanket the place,” Gerling said. “This belongs to someone else, until we find them and take it from them. I truly hope it’s Asano.”

They started searching the city but found it to be empty, with no anomalies or domain holder to confront.

“He has to be here somewhere,” Gerling said. “If he doesn’t contest this territory, it’ll become mine by default.”

“Oh, I’ve made worse mistakes than defaulting on real estate,” Jason said, his voice coming around a corner. They hurried around to find Jason sitting at what looked to be an outdoor café with a large tree in the middle of the dining area. Its high branches and lush foliage offered shady refuge from the bright, clear sky. Jason was wearing a casual suit, as if enjoying a pleasant day on the Riviera.

Gerling and his subordinates gathered up in front of the café, looking at Jason.

“It’s not open,” Jason said regretfully. “I’d love an iced tea.”

“It’s time for you to surrender, Asano,” Gerling said. “Give up your domain and I’ll let you live. You can’t fight me, let alone the rest of us.”

“You Americans have the best training of essence users in the world,” Jason said. “The Chinese are about on par with you, but you leave everyone else in the dust, even with the new training programs Farrah organised. It’s been a few years and they’re catching up, but they’re not there yet.”

“Don’t bother stalling, Asano. Now that I can invade your domain, there’s nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide.”

“Would you mind not interrupting? I’m trying to monologue here. At least wait until I’ve explained my evil plan, strewth. Did you not get the white American protagonist handbook?”

Gerling chose not to put up with any more of Jason’s rambling and took a step towards him. Immediately, Jason’s aura washed over Gerling and his team in a wave. Gerling fended it off with his own aura but the others looked like they were having seizures standing up.

Gerling pushed out with his aura, extending it to the limit. Preventing his aura from being suppressed by Jason was not difficult due to the rank disparity, even with Jason’s potency. His men couldn’t use their auras at all, however, and shielding them with his own was much harder.

“As I was saying,” Jason said, as if their auras weren’t locking horns like raging bulls. “You Americans are trained quite well. The one area you fall short is aura control. You’re not terrible, certainly, and in most cases you’re at a sufficient competence level. But then someone like me comes along and suddenly all your little friends become liabilities. Unless you’re willing to give them up to my soul attacks, which you really shouldn’t. You can trust me on that.”

“Shut up,” Gerling snarled. With a grimace he managed to surge his aura and free his people from Jason’s aura suppression, cutting off the soul attacks. They all collapsed to the ground except for Adrien Barbou, who had not been attacked. He was standing over to the side, trying to look insignificant.

“G’day, Adrien,” Jason said, unperturbed by his attack being arrested. “Can I call you Adrien? We’ve only spoken over the phone before, so this is our first time meeting in person. A bloke might think you were dodging him.”

Gerling rushed at Jason, plunging into a spider web that he hadn’t realised was there and getting stuck in it. He pulled himself free in a series of jerking movements, his gold-rank strength easily up to the task.

“We really are just here to talk,” Mr North said, emerging from the café behind Jason. Barbou’s faced showed a mix of relief, confusion and fear.

“Hello Adrien,” Mr North said.

“You,” Gerling said.

“You know who I am,” Mr North said, sitting at the table with Jason. “That saves an introduction.”

“Why are you with him?” Gerling asked, jerking his head at Jason.

“I’m saving the world,” Mr North said. “I’ve been at it far longer than Mr Asano has. He’s something of a Johnny-come-lately.”

“Some of us aren’t centuries old,” Jason said.

“Really, Mr Asano? Age discrimination?”

“SHUT UP!” Gerling roared.

“Alright,” Jason said, dropping his half-smirk and smug body language. “Gerling, it’s time for you and I to come to terms.”

“Do please sit,” Mr North added. “We can talk now and you’ll still have the option to punch us later.”

At his side, Gerling’s hand squeezed into a fist as Jason and Mr North waited for his response, appearing completely unperturbed. Gerling loosened his fist with an unhappy grimace and took a seat.

“Cards on the table time,” Jason said. “Gerling, you’ve been expanding a domain, yes? You can feel the power growing inside you. That once it’s complete, you’ll truly be able to imprint yourself on this place.”

Gerling nodded but said nothing, letting Jason continue.

“I’ve been where you are, but there’s a problem, in that I have something you don’t. You know that I’ve been telling people that I’m saving the world, while being rather vague as to how.”

“I do.”

“There was an artefact. A powerful tool created by the being who... well, ‘who’ isn’t relevant right now. Suffice to say, this being is powerful beyond imagining.”

“You’re talking about a god.”

“Close enough, for purposes of this conversation,” Jason said.

“I brought this artefact to this world when I arrived in it,” Mr North said. “This was before the Network ever existed. It’s founding was part of a larger plan; a regulatory measure as the world’s magic increased. The purpose was to stabilise this world if it gained too much magic and started to unravel. As it quite demonstrably has.”

“I’ve heard about the thing you’re talking about,” Gerling said, looking at Jason. “You absorbed it.”

“Adrien,” Mr North said with disappointed admonishment, before turning back to Gerling.

“The point,” North continued, “is that the artefact in question allows Jason to edit reality, within very specific and limited parameters. He’s been using it to undo certain

changes made to this world long ago. Changes that have caused the rise in magic that, if not stopped, will destroy the world.”

“You’re trying to take magic away?” Gerling asked.

“No,” Jason said. “That toothpaste is already out of the tube. But the Earth is at its limit, now and can’t take any more increases in magic. Think of it like filling a water balloon at a tap. I’m trying to turn the tap off before the balloon bursts.”

“And an event like this,” Gerling said, gesturing around them, “is a sharp pencil, poking at the balloon.”

“The last abnormal transformation space did damage,” Jason said. “I didn’t do a perfect job of stopping it. This time, I have to, or the balloon pops. That means completely absorbing all of it into a single domain. That’s the only way to make it stable enough when we merge this space back into the world.”

“Then surrender your domain to me,” Gerling said. “I’ll unify it.”

“It’s not that simple,” Mr North said. “There’s a reason we brought up the artefact. Jason’s unique abilities give him a measure of control over this space. His domain was baked into the origins of this one, which we believe to be the reason that others can make more of them.”

“So?” Gerling asked. “It’s already in place, now. Ceding it to me shouldn’t matter.”

“It isn’t just about forming a domain,” Jason said. “It’s about reintegrating that domain. The power the door grants me is critical to making that process go smoothly. It’s probably required to initiate the process at all.”

“Probably?” Gerling asked. “How many of your confident assertions are guesswork?”

“More than we’d like,” Jason admitted. “That’s not a reason to take risks we don’t have to.”

“The risk is putting you in charge of everything,” Gerling said. “Power is what matters in expanding a domain and you don’t have the strength to make this work. I do.”

“Do you?” Jason asked. “How many powers have you unlocked? Five? Six?”

“Three,” Adrien chimed in, earning him a glare from Gerling.

“Mine were unsealed from the beginning,” Jason said. “All of them.”

“That’s crap. The last time, your powers were sealed as well.”

“This is not the same as the last time, Gerling,” Jason said. “If you choose to fight, you’ll find out for yourself. Mr North here will tie you up in webs while I kill and feed on your little minions, taking from their dead bodies the strength I need to kill you too. Which I will.”

“Then why aren’t we fighting already? You gave up the element of surprise.”

“You said it yourself: power is what matters in expanding a domain. We have Mr North, three ancient vampires, the necromancer of Makassar and an army of ghouls. We could use your strength.”

“That’s a real team of heroes you’ve got there. Why should I be part of it? Your vampires aren’t going to come out in the sun, and if I take you down, I’m the only hope that’s left. They’ll fall in line behind me.”

Jason closed his eyes and bowed his head, forcing down the first response that came to mind. Then he forced down the second and third.

“I told you once before, Gerling, that I was asked to put aside thoughts of revenge by someone whose wishes I am compelled to give weight. Let’s end thing here, you and I. We do this, together, and then we each go our own way. You fight the vampire war and save the world from the bloodsucker apocalypse. I leave the Earth to finish what I started here and save it from crumbling from under you. We bury our past and go our separate ways, as soon as we’re out of here.”

“And this little friendship circle starts with my handing over everything that me and my guys have fought for in this place? Everything we’ve earned.”

“No, Gerling. Starting with me putting aside for good the fact that you killed my brother, my lover and my friend.”

“I don’t want your forgiveness.”

Jason ran a frustrated hand over his face.

“Are you that obsessed with power?” he asked.

“Are you that insistent on being the only one that’s special?” Gerling shot back.

Jason stood up and started pacing, scratching absently at his head. Gerling stood up as well.

“Then I guess it’s winner takes all,” Gerling said. “We could have settled this without you two jabbering on.”

Something appeared in front of Gerling’s face.

“What the hell?”

“Just accept it, Gerling,” Jason said. “Let me show you something.”

➤ [\[Jason Asano\] has invited you to form a party. Accept Y/N?](#)

“What is this?” Gerling asked.

“It’s how I see the world,” Jason said. “I can’t hurt you with it. I know you feel that.”

Gerling frowned, conflicted. He didn't trust Jason but his instincts really did tell him it was safe. What decided it, though, was the chance to pry open some of Asano's secrets.

Jason set out several items on the table. A spirit coin, a healing potion and a pair of minor magical gloves he had looted from an anomaly. He talked Gerling through looking at his own character screen and ability descriptions.

"This is how I know the things I know, Gerling. It's not just instinct."

Jason held out his hand for Gerling to shake.

- Jason Asano.
 - Essence user (outworlder, silver rank).
 - ??? (spirit domain hegemon).
-

"This is my fight, Gerling. You have no concept of the enemies I've made along the way."

"You've survived so far," Gerling said.

"No," Jason said. "I haven't."

Still holding Gerling's hand, Jason concentrated.

- Jason Asano.
 - Essence user (outworlder, silver rank).
 - ??? (spirit domain hegemon).
 - Number of deaths: 4.
-

Jason let go.

- [Jason Asano] has disbanded the party.
 - You no longer have access to [Party Interface].
-

Gerling felt an odd sense of loss as the power to see his abilities laid out in front of him was taken away.

"You have your own fight, Gerling. By the time the vampire war is over, you're going to be a hero to the world. Frankly, I'm glad I won't be here to see it."

"Yet, you're working with vampires now."

"There has to be a world to fight over," Jason said. "Even they understand that."

"And what happens to our little club once we're done and you have control?" Gerling asked.

"I've already made deals," Jason said. "I'm not happy about them, but I can live with them."

"You expect us to believe you'll just let us walk away?"

"It varies," Jason said. "The necromancer is getting thrown in a hole where he'll be stuck doing *closely monitored* medical research for the Network. The closest thing the vampires have to a leader will be switching sides."

"You're sure about that?"

"After the loss of the astral space facilities, she's a lot less confident in the her side's chances in the war. She won't be the first to defect. The smart ones know that the faster they come across, the better they'll be once everything is said and done."

Gerling took his own turn to pace as he mulled things over. His people were still lying around, feeling like they'd been through a wringer.

"If I throw in," Gerling said. "If I give up my domain, I want something in return."

"What?" Jason asked.

"Teach me how to use my aura like you. Negate suppression collars. Attack people. How is your aura so strong?"

"Ah," Mr North said. "I don't think that's a path you want to go down, Mr Gerling. Mr Asano's power in that regard is a result of trauma the likes of which I cannot explain. Literally, I cannot. I don't understand what a person would have to go through to reach that point and it would be more likely to destroy you. I've seen that kind of damage leave powerful essence users as broken wrecks. I have no doubt that Mr Asano himself was taken to the brink and took no small amount of time to recover."

"But he did recover," Gerling said. "And now he has an incredible power."

"I had a lot of help," Jason said. "Specialist care, for months."

"I can take it."

"I don't even know how to do that to a person," Mr North said. "We're talking about scouring your very soul."

"I do," Jason said. "If you want to know what it takes, Gerling, lower your aura defences and I'll give you a taste."

"You think I'll just open myself up like that?"

"I told you, Mr Gerling," Mr North said. "Trauma."

"Which you could easily be making up."

"Gerling, how many scars do you have?"

"None, obviously. Essence users can't get..."

Gerling was looking straight at Jason face, trailing off as he realised that the small scars on it shouldn't have been possible.

"How?" he asked.

"Some marks run deeper than others," Jason said. "I'm going to lower my aura defences and you can see for yourself. Take a look at my soul, Gerling."

Jason's aura, which suffused the area as part of his domain, was suddenly diminished. None of it was emitted from Jason himself at all. Gerling, wary of a trap, slowly extended his own out to examine Jason.

Gerling was no stranger to examining the souls of others. As a bully with power, he had often forcefully looked over the souls of the people around him. None of them were anything like Asano's.

Jason's soul was scarred and pitted, like the wall of a fortress that had endured countless sieges and never broken. He could feel powerful forces within. Defiance, resolution. Power. A tyrannical force that would not be swayed by greater powers. There was also something else that made Gerling uneasy. It was faint, just an echo, not belonging to Jason but something that had touched him and left a profound mark. Something Gerling's instincts wanted to call divine but he refused to do so.

Everything about Jason's soul hinted at a story Gerling could not see. Stories of endurance and suffering. Of enemies with impossible power, not just defied but overcome. Jason's soul told stories of victory, and the price he paid for it, time and again.

Gerling pulled his senses back.

"That's my soul, Gerling," Jason said softly.

"You said trauma," Gerling said. "If a few cuts on your face is all it takes to make your break open suppression collars, I'll take that hit."

Jason frowned and shrugged off his light jacket. He unbuttoned his shirt and opened it up, showing the myriad cuts where fragments of star seed had been pushed out of his body. A wide, bright scar ran from his right hip to wind around the left side of his torso. That was from his first fight with a silver-rank monster, when he was only iron-rank. His desperate scramble to distract it as villagers evacuated has almost cost him his life.

"If you want scars, Gerling, I can give them to you. I can rake your soul, if that's what you want, but now isn't the time for that. Now, it's time to choose. Are you going to stand with us or stand against us?"

Chapter 450

Four-Score Men

"Well," Jason said. "This is awkward."

Every person gathered in the mezzanine lounge of the pagoda had either tried to or succeeded in killing or kidnapping at least one other person present.

"Perhaps I should take the lead," Mr North suggested. "While I have tried to arrange several deaths amongst the group, I never tried to kill anyone here personally."

"Whatever works," Jason said. "Just make sure no one tries it again while I'm transfiguring the new territories."

Gerling's face creased with suppressed anger. Although he had ultimately agreed to participate, he was still not entirely at peace with his decision. He held his tongue, however, as Jason got on the elevating platform and ascended through the building.

"Boss," Bennett said. "Are we seriously going along with that guy after all the time you've been setting up to hunt him?"

"If we don't bend to circumstance, Bennett, then we break," Gerling said. "We are dealing with forces here larger than all of us. Don't speak on that again."

"Boss?"

"If Asano isn't listening to us, his shadow familiars are," Gerling said. "Watch your words with care."

Jason completed the transfiguration of the territories surrendered by Gerling.

-
- You have claimed sufficient territory to stabilise the transformation zone and separate it from the convergent astral space.
 - Separating the space with the current territory will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the surrounding reality. Claim additional territory to reduce the severity of this effect. Current severity reduction: 97.4%
 - Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?
-

"That was worth bugger all," he complained after looking at the percentage. "Gerling, your domains were crap."

"I'm afraid he's unable to hear you from here, Mr Asano," Shade said. "If it would save you time, I can explain to him myself that he's a worthless aggregation of excrement whom the cosmos would be better for wiping off its shoe. Metaphorically speaking."

"I appreciate the sentiment," Jason said with a chuckle. "I'm afraid it wouldn't be productive at this stage," Jason said. "It seems that the severity reduction does not perfectly correlate related to how many domains are claimed. It's like a video game that immediately loads to ninety percent and then spends most of the loading time on the last ten."

"It seems likely that broad reductions in severity are relatively easy," Shade said, "but seamlessly integrating this anomalous realm into physical reality takes considerably more effort."

"Even so, we are close to the end."

Jason returned down the elevating platform to the others.

"It's done," he told them. "Now, what remains is to claim the final territories. It's almost complete, but completion grows harder the closer we get."

"I have something I've been wondering about," Todd the necromancer asked.

"What?" Jason asked.

"Three of us built domains separately," Todd said. "For each of us, our domains expanded in rings until they ran into one another. Yet, now you've taken over our territories, it's all just one set of expanding rings, right?"

"That's right," Jason said.

"Wouldn't that mean that the entire geography of this place is undergoing massive changes?" Todd asked. "Even the space it occupies in total would need to shift."

"That's exactly what's happening," Jason said. "I assume that, aside from Mr North, none of you has any grounding in astral magic theory. To my knowledge, most of it in your world was brought here by me, and I didn't share much."

"You mean *our* world," Elizabeth said.

"Yeah," Jason said. "A very bare-bones explanation of the astral is that the cosmos is like a bowl of dumpling soup. Physical realities, meaning universes like ours, with matter and energy and Knight Rider DVD box sets are the dumplings. The astral, which is raw magic that has no physical state, is the soup. You're all familiar with proto spaces and astral spaces. These are parts of a dumpling that the soup had made a bit soggy. They're part of the dumpling, but they work differently because of how they're affected by the soup."

Jason gestured broadly around them.

"This place is what happens when too much soup gets into the dumpling. It breaks apart. To drop the analogy, the magic of the astral realm renders the physical realm unstable and it breaks down. The rules of physical reality, as we understand them, go right

out the window. We're doing nothing less here than trying to rebuild the laws of physics by punching monsters and hoping for the best. That's about as likely to work as it sounds and I can't encapsulate how many things had to line up to give us a chance at this."

He glanced at Gerling.

"Adding more risk to the process is trying to fix Humpty Dumpty by pushing him off the wall again."

"Humpty Dumpty?" asked Elizabeth.

"Right," Jason said. "You've been asleep for centuries."

"It's an English children's rhyme," said Georges, the Frenchman amongst the vampires. "*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall; Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. Four-score men and four-score more, could not make him as he was before.* It means something is irrevocably broken."

"Exactly," Jason said. "Broadly speaking, what I've been doing over the last year is trying to prevent what is happening in this place from happening on a global scale. I don't think it would be exactly the same, but the entire planet becoming an abnormal transformation zone isn't all that far off from what would happen."

"How can you prevent that?" Elizabeth asked.

Jason turned to Mr North.

"Would you care to explain?" Jason asked.

"Long ago," Mr North said, "probably in your time, Miss Elizabeth, someone was sent to our world from another to set the events of the past few years into motion. I came to this world as his companion."

"Companion?" Gerling asked.

"His familiar," Mr North said. "I am not human."

"Hardly any of us are, at this point," Jason said. "Do vampires count?"

"No," Elizabeth said firmly. "Humans are herd animals."

Gerling's eyes hadn't left Mr North.

"So, you're responsible for putting the world in danger," Gerling accused.

"I participated, yes," Mr North admitted. "When I say set the current events in motion, I mean quite thoroughly. My formerly-bonded essence user is known to the Network now as the founder, as in, the man who established the network itself. Your entire organisation was created as a pressure valve. A safety measure to regulate the speed at which magic was injected into this world."

Mr North hung his head.

“As the centuries passed,” Mr North said, “I came to love this world. It can be ugly and cruel, and I have become both in my efforts to shield it, but it can also be wonderful. There is no magic dividing the weak from the strong. Humanity needs to advance as one to push itself forward.”

“That’s not really how it played out,” Jason said.

“No?” Mr North countered. “A diamond-ranker is a nuclear bomb that can walk around and do what it likes. No one individual in this world has the power they have in the other. Money and influence go far but no one here is immortal. There are no thousand-year kings. Until I came here and interfered with that order, this world had no taint of magic.”

Mr North’s animated body language suddenly stopped dead.

“That is why I turned against my essence user,” he said softly. “Betrayed him to Mr Gerling’s Network antecedents. This is the seed from which the advantage of the United States Network branches originates. I handed him over, both to stop him and to give myself the resources to begin my work.”

“What work is that?” Gerling asked. “Making superheroes?”

“In part, yes. I know what it looks like when essences are the source of power. I sought to democratise magic. Create a pathway to magic that I could give to everyone who wanted it, not just those who hoard and dole out essences as they please. It would give humanity more magic than I wanted them to have but that die had already been cast and I knew what was coming. What became the human augmentation project was centuries in the making and is yet to be perfected. I’ve taken shortcuts that I wish, on balance, I had not.”

“You used Builder cores to somehow stop their power from driving them insane,” Jason said.

“Modified clockwork cores, yes. My people discovered what is called a clockwork king, largely destroyed. It was here long before I ever arrived, for reasons unknown to me, but I exploited it. And Mr Asano, in turn, has exploited that to kill them with ease.”

“That’s how you killed those people in Venezuela,” Gerling said to Jason. “You know their weakness.”

“And he can exploit it, because of an artefact my essence user brought from the other world. It was the tool he brought to set off the changes in the world’s magic. It was also meant to be the most important tool to fix things if they went wrong. Which they did, but he was gone.”

“You couldn’t use it?”

"I could not, or I would have. The founder was originally from this world. He was drawn into the other and then sent back, just like Mr Asano. This bestowed the founder with certain traits and the artefact was protected such that only someone with those traits could use it. This was so that if anything happened to him, someone else could be sent to take up his work."

Mr North turned his gaze on Jason.

"Enter, Mr Asano. I have been preparing for his arrival since long before he was born, yet he surprised me. I was expecting a zealot when what arrived was a naïve fool with a hero complex. I had been anticipating an enemy, only to receive an ally."

Jason's lips pressed together unhappily but he held his tongue.

"Mr Asano's disposition changed much for me," Mr North said. "Unfortunately, I did not understand who and what he was until it was too late. I had already set events in motion that changed the world."

"You took down the grid," Jason said. "Initiated the monster waves and sent this world's magic careening out of control."

"The dangers this world faces now are only the beginning," Mr North said. "Unfortunately, I have set in motion the very events I have sought to avoid. Mr Asano will repair the world, but the only way to do so is to set in motion that which I have been trying to stop. My actions, in trying to set the timetable of events, could have, perhaps been avoided. It is too late, now, and all we can do is weather each storm after the next."

"What are you describing?" Elizabeth asked. "You are being very vague on the nature of this threat."

"Yes," Mr North said. "As I will continue to be."

"Those are the concerns of another day," Jason said, "but I hope you now understand why I'm willing to strike bargains when I would rather see you all dead. Mr North has more to answer for than any of you, but the people in this room constitute some of the most powerful forces on Earth. We're going to need you all, in the future, as well as right now."

Jason walked over to the mezzanine railing and looked out over the atrium.

"I think there will be one or two more territories before we're done," he said. "Progress is slow, so it may be three; I can't be certain. With the extra territories I've claimed, the strength of the anomalies will be greater than what we've seen in the past. Expect them to have all the strength of category four monsters. Only by working as a team will we be able to beat them."

Jason turned to look at Adrien Barbou, standing at the back with Gerling's henchmen.

“Barbou, there’s no point taking you. You’ll die, and die fast. As for your people, Gerling, I’ll leave that decision up to you.”

Gerling turned to his own group, eight silver-rankers.

“I can enhance your powers,” Gerling told them. “Give you the strength to contribute. Make no mistake, though: If you join, the chances of death are high. That’s true for all of us, let alone, you. I won’t force anyone, and I won’t think any less of you for staying back. But you’ve heard the stakes. There are worse things to die for than saving the world.”

Gerling’s men looked at each other. One of them looked reluctant as he spoke up.

“I’m sorry, boss. I don’t... I don’t want to die.”

“It’s okay,” Gerling said. “When I asked you all to join me, this was never a part of the deal.”

In the end, half of Gerling’s eight participated. The other four stayed behind with Barbou in the pagoda, while Jason led the rest outside, where Shade had taken the form of a jet hovering over the driveway, a platform descending on cables to allow people to board.

As the plane winged toward the new edge of Jason’s domain, Jason sat alone in the cockpit, although Shade was doing the piloting.

“Mr Asano, may I ask what all of the explanation was in aid of?” Shade asked. “It hardly seems worth the effort.”

“Which is exactly the point,” Jason said. “If my intention was to kill them all, why bother?”