

## Chapter 411

### A Beautiful Woman and a Sack of Cash

Jason needed to claim most, if not all of the vast extradimensional space he found himself in. If he failed, a wound would appear in the side of reality leading to the Earth's rapid annihilation. He could bring about the transformation by expanding what his powers described as a spirit domain, something he only moderately understood. Thus far, he had managed to convert the top three floors of a dilapidated hotel, turning it into a cold place of dark crystal.

His progress was far too slow but he had a new weapon - or an old one, reborn. The sword that Gary had forged in the hope of it helping Jason when his need was greatest. Now that it was newly-empowered, Jason believed it would live up to Gary's intentions. Before he set out to use it, though, there was more power to potentially invest in it.

Standing by the stairs leading down to the second floor, Jason took an item from his inventory. The soul-imprinting triune had obvious religious connotations from the name but took the form of a plain pyramidal object, the size of a melon. Running his fingers over the smooth surface, Jason couldn't tell if the dark material it was made from was stone or metal, but it was quite heavy for its size. Jason had previously not met the qualifications for its use and had even vaguely considering scribbling numbers of it with a white marker and using it as a novelty four-sided die.

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Item: [Soul-Imprinting Triune] (unranked, legendary)

*An object with the power to allow imprinting of the soul on three soul-bonded objects. (consumable, magic core).*

- Effect: Select three growth items that are soul-bound to you. These items will become a unified set. When all three objects are on your person (not contained within a dimensional space), each will gain an additional effect. The specific effects are determined by the types of objects included in the set and the nature of your soul.
- Current soul-bound items: [Amulet of the Dark Guardian], [Cloud Flask], [Dread Salvation].
- You meet the qualifications to use this item.

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The soul-imprinting triune would allow Jason to turn his soul-bound items into a set. It was an exciting opportunity but there was also one noticeable problem. One of the items, which were required to be carried directly on his person, was the cloud flask. There was no

problem with his amulet or sword, but the cloud flask was the size and shape of a round-bottom boiling flask. It was not exactly the most convenient item to be carrying around in a fight. He needed to weight up the pros and cons of using the triune now.

“Pro,” he mused out loud. “If I include the cloud flask, the extra effect might be a flying cloud, like Monkey Magic. I mean, yeah, I’m not short on flying powers. I have Shade and I can fly with my cloak, but still. Definite pro.”

There was no one to tell Jason off for having inappropriate ideas but he couldn’t help but feel the shadows of Shade and Farrah looking at him with disapproval.

“Con, I’ll have to lug the cloud flask around if I want to use the extra abilities.”

Another pro to using the item was that it offered him power now. With his abilities sealed and the world itself at stake, he needed every advantage he could get. The attendant con was that there were no guarantees the effects would be any good. If he held off until he found a better-suited item, the dividends of patience could be great. Of course, he had no idea when or if he would get another soul-bound item, or if it would be any more convenient to carry around than the cloud flask.

As he considered, Jason wandered back up the stairs to the rooftop. Looking out at the dark realm around him, it was largely hidden from his eyes by a pervasive gloom that seemed tangible. The starlight struggling to penetrate it barely let him make out vast silhouettes in the distance that could be diamond-rank monsters for all he knew. It was entirely likely that even at full strength his efforts to stabilise the vast area would be futile. In the face of that, there was little point in holding off on taking power he could get now for some potential power that may never come.

The cloud flask was empty, the contents still in the form of a boat docked in Venice. Farrah, Dawn and his family were awaiting his return there. Jason couldn’t even be certain that the triune could be used on the cloud flask without its contents, although, with the decision made, he was about to find out.

Looking around at the flat rooftop of dark crystal, this was the substance that Jason’s portals and the structures within his soul were made of. Originally it had been simple obsidian, but that changed after he absorbed the Builder’s magical door.

Jason held out his hand and concentrated, employing methods he used to manipulate reality in node space. He stood for a long time, pressing out with his aura as he tried to understand the nature of the otherworldly dimension he inhabited.

The space was abnormally blended the physical and the spiritual, much like Jason himself. The immediate area was also part of the spiritual domain he had claimed, so he should be able to control it. He used his aura like a microscope, trying to grasp the

fundamental underpinnings of the mutable reality of the transformation zone. He closed his eyes, his physical senses being useless in the endeavour.

Slowly, he was able to make out some of the properties of the space around him, his experiences with node space and studies in astral magic being pivotal. It was far from a complete understanding but it was enough that he could get around some of the basic underpinnings of how the reality worked. Compared to a full-blown physical reality, the transformation zone, still in flux, was much easier to comprehend.

Using the same mental commands that let him control his cloud house, combined with the reality-bending techniques he used in node space, he tried to make an active change. It took some time before he got it quite right, but finally, the crystal surface of the roof flowed like liquid, rising to take the shape of a table before once more setting firmly.

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- Your understanding of your spiritual domain had improved. Evolution of ability [Spirit Vault] had advanced due to your insight.
  - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 1.784%.
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Jason took out his cloud flask and set it on the table. The sword came off his belt and the amulet from around his neck, both of which he laid out as well. He held the triune in his hands.

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- You meet the qualifications to use [Soul-Imprinting Triune].
  - Use [Soul-Imprinting Triune] on [Amulet of the Dark Guardian], [Cloud Flask] and [Dread Salvation]?
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Jason gave his mental assent and the triune started dissolving into a mist that spread over Jason and the objects on the table. They floated into the air and started drifting around Jason's body. Jason felt his soul reaching out to the objects, striving to deepen the shallow connection it already had to them. As it did, he could feel each of the three objects. The mist started condensing into lines, connecting Jason to his magical items.

The amulet had the strongest affinity to him already. The last item produced by his old quest system before that ability evolved, the power had left him with a potent final gift.

- 
- [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has been added to set [Regalia of the Dark Hegemon].

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

*A protective amulet with the power of a shadowy guardian. Has the power to express the will of the hegemon (jewellery, necklace).*

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else.
- 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.
- Effect (set bonus, Regalia of the Hegemon): For each instance of an affliction applied to an enemy, gain an instance of [Hegemon's Will].
- [Guardian's Blessing] (boon, holy, stacking): 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.
- [Hegemon's Will] (boon, holy, unholy, stacking): All allies within your aura have increased resistance to aura suppression. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consume instances of this boon to enhance your aura suppression strength.

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The amulet was a reproduction of Jason's personal crest on a delicate obsidian chain. As Jason's soul imprinted on it, the chain transmuted into the same dark crystal that made up the spirit domain around him.

The cloud flask was the work of some unknown diamond-rank craftsman and felt more distant and nebulous than the amulet. Jason had been using it for a couple of years now and they had grown stronger together, but the flask still felt like it still had secrets locked away until they grew stronger still.

- 
- [Cloud Flask] has been added to set [Regalia of the Dark Hegemon].

Item: [Cloud Flask] (silver rank [growth], legendary)

*A vessel containing the power to generate sophisticated cloud constructs. Has the power to serve as a tool of the hegemon (vessel, tool).*

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else.
- Effect: Use the energies within the cloud flask to create buildings and vehicles made of clouds. Available forms are restricted by rank.
- Effect: Items contained within the cloud construct when it is returned to the flask are stored in a dimensional space and cannot be recovered until another cloud construct is formed.

- Effect (set bonus, Regalia of the Hegemon): Shrouds the wearer in mist. Mist can be controlled through aura manipulation to condense into small cloud constructs. Constructs only provide effective defence against attacks lower than the rank of this item; attacks of its rank and above are minimally impeded. Shroud can be withdrawn into the flask.
  
  - Available forms (iron rank): Cloud house (grand), cloud house (adaptive).
  - Available forms (bronze rank): Cloud vehicle (grand), cloud vehicle (adaptive).
  - Available forms (silver rank): Cloud palace (grand), cloud palace (adaptive).
- 

The cloud flask shrank down the size of a thumb, floated over to the amulet and attached itself to the crystal chain.

“Well, that’s convenient.”

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In Venice, Farrah, Dawn and Jason’s family were in a cloud construct disguised as a yacht, watching a news website covering the transformation zone in Slovakia. There was little information as no media personnel were allowed close to the dome. Jason’s arrival had been witnessed at a distance and they had seen many of the forces around the dome go running up the dome after him, despite the steep, slick surface. No information was coming out, though, reducing the coverage to little more than endless rounds of postulation.

“I’m sure your uncle is fine,” Erika assured her daughter. “You don’t need to sit watching this for hours on end.”

“Your mother is right,” Farrah said. “You know what he’s like. He’ll swagger back in, insufferably smug, and won’t shut up about saving the world for a month. He’ll probably even get some stupid new power or a crazy magic item or something.”

Suddenly the cloud palace was flooded with Jason’s aura, which everyone but Emi could sense.

“Is he...?” Farrah asked of Dawn.

“This isn’t him,” Dawn said. “This is the cloud construct.”

The disguised exterior of the cloud construct rippled, like the surface of a pond after a stone was dropped into it, although no one was around at the abandoned dock to see. On the inside, the cloud stuff started to change. The white cloud stuff turned a dark but vibrant blue, while the sunset gold and blues become bright, wild colours and patterns of a space nebula. There bright reds and greens, yellows and purples, churning and flowing.

“What’s happening?” Erika asked. “Did something happen to Jason?”

“Did he take a bunch of LSD?” her husband Ian wondered.

"I don't know what's going on," Farrah said.

The colours started to slow their kaleidoscopic swirling across the wall, the white colour coming back. The other colours became more subdued, although they were different from what came before, the sunset colours replaced with the brighter and more varied nebula shades. The sense of Jason's aura diminished but didn't vanish entirely.

"Do not be concerned," Dawn said. "It would appear that whatever Asano is experiencing, it has allowed him to forge a deeper connection with his cloud flask."

"You know almost everyone here is an Asano, right?" Emi asked. "You should call him Jason or you're just being rude."

Dawn was uncertain how to respond to that so she didn't and turned once more to Farrah.

"It would appear that you were correct, Miss Hurin, in positing that he would reap gains during this event."

"See," Farrah complained. "Even dying makes him come back stronger. That guy could fall into a pit trap and he'd crawl out with a beautiful woman and a sack of cash."

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Inside Jason's spirit domain, his sword was taking longer than the other items to deepen the soul-bond. The sword felt the most discordant of the three items, filled with potential but hampered by the limitations of its form. It strained to exert the power constrained within it, yearning to be reforged.

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➤ [Dread Salvation] has been added to set [Regalia of the Dark Hegemon].

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

*A sword awaiting the chance to be the iron fist of the hegemon. The original creator must demonstrate his growth and reforge the weapon for it to surpass its origins and fulfil its potential (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).
  - Effect (Regalia of the Hegemon): Enemies struck with this weapon are subjected to a mild mana drain effect and are inflicted with [Hegemon's Tribute].
  - [Hegemon's Tribute] (affliction, magic): Anyone affected by Hegemon's tribute is subject to a mild, ongoing mana drain effect by the wielder of [Dread Salvation] so long as they remain within the wielder's aura. If this affliction is cleansed or the subject dies, a final burst of mana is drained.
  - Growth conditions (silver): Sealed.
  - [Dread Salvation] has reached the maximum potential of its current form. It must be reforged by the original craftsperson in order to advance further.
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The items stopped floating around Jason as the mist that the triune had turned into faded away. They gently drifted back down onto the table as Jason looked over the extensive description windows. After reviewing it all, he placed the necklace with the amulet and the miniaturised flask around his neck. The sword he slid back into its scabbard. Then he looked out over the dark landscape that seemed a little less intimidating than before.

"Alright," he said to no one. As when he first arrived in Farrah's world, he found himself alone and talking to himself. He was eager for Shade to be released so he had someone to make wildly outdated and barely relevant pop culture references to.

"Time to get to work."

## Chapter 412

### You Have to Be True to Yourself

The mist produced by his cloud flask in amulet form swirled around Jason, mostly gathering around his feet as if only slightly heavier than air.

“It’s like there’s a dry ice machine hidden in my underpants.”

By concentrating, he could make the mist take various forms. A shield was easy to produce and an obvious use but he knew the defensive properties would be mediocre. He continued to experiment and established several things about his cloud flasks new abilities. He could send the mist to form a construct anywhere within his aura range that he could see, but once it was formed it could no longer move, dashing his hopes of flying on a cloud like the Monkey King. Floating furniture was easy and convenient, but fine, precision objects like keys or wire mesh were out of the question. What he could do was create multiple, small constructs at once.

Sophie had an ability called cloud step that allowed her to treat the air as solid ground. Now that Jason could make cloud constructs, he could do the same with actual clouds allowing him to air walk on them like floating steps.

His silver-rank agility would allow him to make acrobatic use of it in combat, although it would take some practise first. While extreme mobility had long been a part of his training, he was far behind Sophie in combat acrobatics.

Fortunately, Jason anticipated no shortage of chances to practise. He made his way down the stairs, to the landing between the third storey, which he already claimed, and the second storey, where his spirit domain currently ended.

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- You are at the border of your spirit domain. Minimum cost to expand: 3 [Stable Genesis Cores]. Would you like to expand your spirit domain?
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He gave his mental assent.

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- How many [Stable Genesis Cores] will you expend to expand your spirit domain (26 available)?
- 

It had taken a total of nine cores to claim each floor, which thus far he had done in patches.

“Nine,” Jason said as he drew his sword. He started walking down the stairs as they transformed into dark crystal.

- 
- 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: 1.936%.
- 

Jason concentrated his aura on the sword in his hand as he reached the bottom of the stairs. He fed as much of his aura strength into it as he could but its capacity was disappointingly limited.

- 
- Damage of [Dread Salvation] has been enhanced to maximum current level
  - Current damage increase: Moderate.
  - Ongoing mana cost: Low.
- 

He could already hear the anomalies scrambling in his direction. The first three reached him quickly, one humanoid, one snake with a giant eyeball instead of a head and one scorpion with no pincers but multiple tails. At the end of each tail, instead of a stinger, there was a baby's face, mouths wide open to reveal long, pointed teeth.

Jason only reflected for a moment on the macabre creatures before rushing to meet them. The snake leapt forward and Jason met it with the sword point on, burying the blade to the hilt through the creature's bulbous eye. No longer subject to silver-rank damage reduction, the powered-up sword was finally showing its worth. With its damage enhanced, it plunged easily into the snake anomaly, killing it immediately.

The scorpion skittered forward and Jason launched into a spinning flip, severing all three tails in a horizontal slash and landing in a crouch. Springing back up, he made short work of the humanoid anomaly, taking off an arm and then a head before it collapsed. He kept moving, wanting to catch out the anomalies before too many of them bunched together.

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By the time he was done with the entire level, Jason had dealt with sixteen anomalies on that floor. There didn't seem to be a set number of anomalies per genesis core used to expand his territory. As far as Jason could tell it was a combination of individual anomaly strength and total size of the domain. The larger it got, the more anomalies appeared per core used to expand it.

Condensing his mist shroud into a chair, he sat down to take stock of what he had learned. For one thing, the anomalies were even weaker than he thought, despite their silver-rank auras. Aside from their silver-rank damage reduction, few showed any power beyond that of a bronze-rank monster. With his silver-rank attributes and newly empowered sword, Jason could easily mow through the living anomalies. He had a sneaking suspicion that things would not remain quite so easy as he continued expanding the domain.

His other gain was a better understanding of what he could do and accomplish with his mist shroud. Even against the weak creatures, the objects he could create provided no real defence but were useful for obscuring vision and delaying an opponent for a brief but critical moment.

Jason hadn't come out of the fights unscathed, so he rested in the chair long enough for Colin's regenerative powers to restore him. Then he stood up and moved to loot the scattered anomalies before heading for the last of the building's five floors.

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After Jason entered the portal set into the top of the dome, the factions waiting to exploit the transformation zone gathered around the portal. Each unwilling to surrender benefits to the others, they were still negotiating who should go in when the portal sealed, shortly after Jason had vanished through it. The ring of crystal set into the dome remained, but inside it, the roiling energy was cut off by the same glassy surface as the rest of the dome.

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Jason completed the ground floor at a run, hitting his stride as he made short work of the anomalies. The entire building was now incorporated into his spirit domain.

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- You have overtaken a genesis space territory and purged all anomalous elements.
  - Completed territory is being remade.
- 

Everything in the hotel had been changed into dark crystal as he claimed it but otherwise remained the same. Shortly after the last anomaly was looted and dissolved, that started to change as the entire building was restructured. The crystal started shifting around him, walls breaking apart and morphing into new shapes. He stood rooted on the spot, worried about getting caught up in the transformation.

It quickly became apparent that the building was transforming into a larger version of the pagoda from Jason's spirit vault. As alcoves started appearing in the wall for flowers to

grow out from, this became even more apparent. These were the same flowers that appeared in the gardens that sprawled around the pagoda in his spirit vault.

Jason knew that his task was to stabilise the transformation zone that failed to consolidate due to merging with a proto-space. Now he discovered that meant turning the transformation space into an oversized replica of his soul. The problem was that, as far as he could tell, the proto-space had made the space inside the dome larger than the space it occupied outside.

Jason had no idea how much territory he would have to claim to effectively stabilise the transformation zone. Enough to cover the original space or the expanded area created by the proto-space? What would happen when the dome no longer separated the space outside from the space inside? He was pretty sure that the same place trying to be two different sizes at the same time would be very, very bad.

Finally, the changes to the building were completed, leaving Jason in a large atrium on the ground level. He could sense that the space around him had changed, becoming more stable. It had the heavy permanence of node space, rather than the chaotic fragility of a proto-space in the process of collapse.

Looking around, the dominant feature of the atrium was the water spilling down from the mezzanine second level dropping into a pool in the middle of the atrium floor.

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- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
  - Territory has been renamed [Arrival Pagoda].
  
  - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 4.1%.
  
  - Anomalies attacking as a result of further spirit domain expansion will have increased power.
- 

“And there it is,” Jason said, reading the system message. “I knew it was too easy.”

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When the portal atop the dome unexpectedly opened again, the various forces gathered around it watched one another nervously. They still wanted to stop anyone else from seizing whatever treasures lay within but also didn't want to miss another window for entry. The local faction leaders stood around the portal, only their most important subordinates with them by unspoken consensus. They came to an agreement and volunteered some bronze-rankers to go through. One vampire, one essence user and one of the EOA's personnel were selected, although the Network factions were unhappy about

having one person represent them all. This was especially true when it was the network ritualists who had been trying to open the portal back up, albeit to little effect.

The results of entering the portal were not good as the people who went in stumbled back out after only a few moments, looking as if they'd been dipped in acid. This put paid to sending anyone else through until the Network faction put forward a proposal. Their ritualists would collaborate on finding a way to enter safely, on the condition that all the Network factions could send participants individually for the next attempted to go inside. That meant the old leadership faction, the Americans, the Global Defence Network and the Chinese, who had belatedly arrived.

The Chinese Network branches had been keeping to themselves while an information blackout all but sealed off the country. Normally, other factions and governments would have taken the time and effort to pierce that veil but with the world in chaos, if anyone had, they were keeping to themselves. Rumours of what China's Network branches were up to ranged from they'd been overrun by the Cabal to they had taken over their own country, more successfully than the Americans had with theirs.

At first, the Slovakia transformation zone was one more event the Chinese didn't show up for, but following Jason's arrival and entry, they had mobilised their forces and claimed a site around the dome. Now the leader of the Chinese forces, Miss Li, proposed that the Network factions pool the knowledge of their ritualists to find a safe means of entry.

The other factions reluctantly accepted and the Network immediately presented dimensional probes. It turned out that every faction had the same idea and had already been reinforcing the probes they used to test proto-space apertures in preparation.

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Jason explored the pagoda, which was a broad and elaborate residential complex. The dark crystal remained the primary construction material but now it was filled with furniture and plants everywhere. Flowering plants covered the walls like wallpaper, their bright colours forming nebula-like patterns.

"Gordon, were you in charge of the decoration?"

The furniture was more subdued, with dark wood and light fabric, providing a sober contrast to the colourful flowers. What Jason liked the most was the breeze that gently tussled at his clothes and carried the delicate scent of flowers through the rooms and hallways.

The building wasn't even the same shape as it had been, having changed from a rectangular box to an octagonal design. The roof was no longer accessible, being sloped

instead of flat, but each floor had balconies running around the outside. As he wandered around, Jason found the hotel turned into what was a lot like a high-end apartment building.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to charge a lot of rent,” Jason mused as he walked through a wide hallway washed with cool light by crystals set into the ceiling. There was even a water feature that ran through the central hallways on every floor, all running down to a waterfall giving the hallway a courtyard feel with the plants and the high ceiling.

Jason followed his senses to the fourth floor, where he had sensed the portal he arrived through open back up as the territory reshaped itself. Now, instead of a circle in the ceiling, it was a more familiar arch. It was set in place as a permanent fixture in a room dedicated to it and Jason looked around curiously.

“It’s kind of like a bathroom except with a portal instead of a place to do a poo.”

As he watched the active portal, a small drone floated through and he grabbed it. Immediately it started dissolving like ice plunged into boiling water and was gone after a few seconds.

“Huh.”

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“Well?” Miss Li demanded of the drone operator. They were next to the portal, the operator holding a tablet that should have been receiving data.

“No signal at all,” the operator said. “Not even a destruct signal. I don’t think anything can get through the portal.”

Jason head popped up through the portal and looked around curiously.

“Oh, g’day, Miss Li. It’s been a while, do you remember me? It’s Jason. Jason Asano.”

Miss Li had been part of the team that attempted to recruit Jason to China’s cause after the Network became aware of who and what he was. She glared at what looked like Jason’s disembodied head, sticking out of the portal.

“I remember, Mr Asano. I also remember the discourtesy you showed my country during your unannounced visit.”

“My what? Oh, the thing where I sent all that concentration camp footage to... um, I mean, what footage? I mean, I didn’t say footage. Visit where, now? Uh... how you livin’ girl?”

The vampires, essence users and EOA enhanced humans all looked at Jason in confused, awkward silence.

“I’m just going to go,” Jason said sheepishly and his head ducked back inside.

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Jason's head felt very tingly after being in a reality very different in nature to what his body was and he shook his head.

"I kind of like it."

He wondered about the events going on outside briefly before pushing them aside as irrelevant. Even in Jason's domain, the caustic energy of a node space was still present, so they were welcome to try coming in.

"That Miss Li still has that formal yet sultry thing going on. Too bad she's evil."

During the six months in which he wandered across Asia, Europe and Africa, Jason had spent a decent amount of that in China. He had not liked what he discovered about how the Network branches there were operating and sowed a few seeds of trouble before moving on.

Another drone came through, suffering the same fate as the first.

"Good luck with that," Jason said and left the room.

He made his way down the levels of the pagoda, feeling relief at having a way out of the transformation zone. There was no telling exactly how much he needed to stabilise it to stave off disaster, so at least now he could push things as far as possible without getting himself killed and then leave, hoping that he'd done enough.

He reached the second floor and jumped off the mezzanine right before remembering he no longer had his slow fall cloak. His silver-rank body could easily endure the fall but his pride could not and he desperately formed a cloud bed to catch himself, right before he smacked into the ground.

"That worked out nicely," he said, nodding his approval as he put his hands behind his head. He considered the pagoda-shaped residential complex, from the water feature hallways to the ubiquitous wall planters to the vast atrium with its own waterfall. He hadn't found the source of the water, although he never really looked. At this point in his life, it wasn't worth investigating ever little bit of magic or he'd never get anything done.

"None of this building is very pagoda-like on the inside," Jason said, looking around. "If all this was made by my soul, I think my soul might be a failed architect. I'll think going warlock ninja as a profession was the right call."

Jason looked at the double doors leading to the outside to whatever new challenges lay beyond.

"Don't open them both," he told himself. "You only need one door. Opening them both would be cheesy and melodramatic. For once, don't be a chuuni and go through one door like a regular person."

Walking up, he pushed both doors open.

“I guess, in life, you have to be true to yourself.”

## Chapter 413

### One More Secret

Jason looked around suspiciously at a mostly modern metropolitan street, with a few anachronistic quirks. Most of the buildings were three or four storeys high, packed close together and the ground level filled with storefronts.

“This was definitely farmland before the transformation zone appeared.”

When he had been on the roof of the hotel before its transformation, Jason hadn't seen any of the cityscape that should have been easy to spot, even through the gloom.

Looking over the city street, mostly everything looked modern but a few elements stood out as unusual. The streetlamps glowed with electric light, yet had a strange design like old gas lamps. In the window of one of the stores was a television that looked right out of the sixties.

Most out of place were the cars, looking like set dressing for some retro-future film. A mix of familiar and strange, new and old, they blended the rounded designs of sixties cars with sci-fi elements like light shining out from between the body panels.

“There's kind of an old-school Batmobile thing going on,” Jason said, moving closer to examine a black car. “Shade do you think...”

Jason's shoulders slumped as he trailed off, remembering. He could feel the familiars inside him but couldn't call them out, which angered him more than having all his other powers sealed. More than the powers they offered, his familiars were his ever-reliable companions and without them he was alone.

Having lost the taste for exploring, Jason looked around with more assessing purpose than curiosity. The Pagoda stood out on the city street. Prominently occupying a huge roundabout, the dark stone building was an archaic contrast to the city around it.

Despite the familiarity of the city setting, there were discordantly alien aspects to it. The signage on the buildings was alien, and while Jason could read it with his translation power, he recognised neither the language nor the alphabet it used.

Jason wandered around, alert but not tense. In each previous instance, anomalies hadn't appeared until he expanded his spirit domain, giving him the chance to explore first. He wasn't ruling out that changing but neither was he walking on a knife's edge in his readiness. He approached a shopfront and the door slid open. It looked like an ordinary clothing store inside.

He explored a little further, finding another hotel, a café and what looked to be a pharmacy. As he moved, he could only see around a dozen metres through the gloom.

Otherwise, all he could see were the stars in the sky and the pale glow of the street lamps, like a procession of willow-'o-the-wisps.

“I don't suppose there's a gun store around here.”

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High over Slovakia, a man flew through the sky, shrouded in a nimbus of light. Moving faster than the speed of sound, he slowed as the giant dome of the transformation zone came into view. Continuing to decelerate as he descended, he landed amongst the people gathered around the portal on top of the dome.

Li Li-Mei bowed at the arrival of the man, whose handsome features had been rendered ageless by his gold rank.

“Mr Chen,” she greeted him.

“Little Mei,” Chen said warmly. “How could I not come when you ask? And now you're so big and strong, am I not good enough to call uncle anymore?”

“Uncle,” Li said, blushing slightly. “I am glad that we have been able to awaken you from your long slumber.”

“I wish my wife felt the same,” Chen said with a chuckle.

The others around the portal had varying reactions to Chen's arrival. He shared acknowledging nods with the two Chinese gold-rankers that had arrived with Miss Li, theirs slightly deeper than his as a gentle acknowledgement of his primacy.

Most of the other people gathered were the most powerful members of their factions present, most notably the vampire lords. None were happy that there were now three Chinese gold rankers. Not only did it give them the advantage in power but suggested that China had enough gold-ranked essence users to spare three of them for a single task.

The ancient vampires, especially, were seething. Unused to accepting equals, let alone superiors, they nonetheless held back their usual domineering arrogance. The vampires had learned the hard way that one-on-one, a vampire was no match for an essence user of equal power. Normally they compensated with numbers, but six vampires against three essence users was a questionable risk at best. It was only made worse by the return of Jack Gerling.

Drawn by the arrival of another gold-ranker, Gerling returned to the portal, arriving less aggressively than the last time by moderating the pace of his explosive-driven flight. Chen looked at Gerling as he arrived, giving him a nod.

“Mr Gerling. I would never have expected to meet you again after all this time. Still playing pig to catch the tiger?”

“Mr Chen,” Gerling greeted in turn. “Still acting like a friendly neighbourhood uncle as you sail down a river of blood?”

Both men laughed, their smiles not reaching their eyes.

“My old friend’s lovely daughter has asked me to take a look and see if I can’t find a way inside,” Chen said. “If I can, would you care to join us? I think we can comfortably leave the leeches behind.”

The vampires watching on stirred but held their tongues.

“If we can get in safely, then yes,” Gerling said. “I’ll take you up on that.”

Gerling had been unwilling to test the waters alone, but if the old dog Chen and his aggravating shield powers were brought into play, that changed things considerably. There was, of course, the potential for betrayal, but the various Network branches were all aware of the common enemy. Category four essence users were few and far between, with this gathering of four possibly being unprecedented, while more vampire lords crawled out of the earth every day.

\*\*\*

Jason was standing outside the pagoda’s front doors.

- 
- You are at the border of your spirit domain.
  - Your spirit domain occupies one territory. Expansion requires encroaching on the surrounding territory.
  - Minimum cost to expand: 31 [Stable Genesis Cores]. Would you like to expand your spirit domain?
- 

Thirty-one cores were more than triple what the cost to claim each floor of the building had been, and that was the minimum to expand into the surrounding territory. He certainly wasn't going to try using cores above the minimum amount when he had already been warned of stronger anomalies.

He spent the cores and the ground around the pagoda started to change. Like a shadow passing overhead, transformation swept out, taking in the street, buildings and cars. To Jason’s surprise, the shift wasn’t all to dark crystal, the way the hotel had been. It was certainly an element, being incorporated into the road surface especially, but the environment, in general, went through a much more sophisticated transfiguration than the building had when the territory completed. Even so, Jason was certain that the territory he was now digging into was larger than this first section.

What stood out the most was that while the streets were dark crystal, the buildings were made from a substance reminiscent of Jason's cloud house. The materials were more solid, but the colours and textures of the buildings were very familiar, with lots of summer cloud white splashed with other wild colours. A large part of this was the largest structural change, which was a massive increase in plant life. Rows of trees ran down traffic islands between street lanes and planters lined the footpaths with bright flowers.

All of this was easy to observe because the gloom was pushed back by the expansion of Jason's domain, allowing bright starlight to shine down. It left many of the colours seeming subdued and washed out but was a great improvement over the pervasive dark.

The cars went largely unchanged, although their designs became sleeker and less rounded, with slick metallic paint jobs. Those with more pastel colours turned to mostly dark shades of red, green and black, although Jason spotted one that was a hot pink that he rather liked the look of.

- 
- Your spirit domain has expanded.
  - Interaction with genesis space has instigated uncontrolled secondary evolution of ability [Spirit Vault]. Further interaction will complete evolution.
  - Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised and refined the secondary evolution path of [Spirit Vault].
  - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 4.7%.
- 

That wasn't a big boost to his skill evolution. It appeared that completing territories was much more effective than general expansion. Jason postulated that this reflected that claiming a sufficient number of territories was required to stabilise the space as a whole. This fit with Jason's existing assumptions but it was nice to have some supporting evidence.

The expansion extended to the end of the street some fifty metres away, beyond which the gloom continued to obstruct Jason's vision. Jason prepared himself for an onslaught of living anomalies but the freshly transformed streets remained silent. After waiting for a minute, sword in hand, Jason resheathed it and started walking around the outside of the pagoda, watching out for sudden attacks.

The new territory he was encroaching upon was significantly larger than the building, which it completely surrounded. After completely circling the pagoda and seeing his domain spread the same distance in each direction, Jason set out towards the new edge of his spirit domain.

\*\*\*

Standing on top of the dome, Chen conjured up a large dark red cauldron that was filled with impenetrable darkness. The cauldron emitted a thick, coppery scent of hot blood. A red and white orb floated up from the pot, a grotesque bloodshot eyeball the size of a basketball. Chen cast a fairly lengthy spell and a shimmering red force field appeared around it. The cauldron vanished and the orb floated over to the portal and plunged into it.

\*\*\*

Jason grew increasingly wary as he moved closer to the new border of his domain without spotting any anomalies. His aura senses grew stronger and more widespread with each expansion of his domain but still stopped dead at the end of his territory. As he moved closer to the gloom surrounding his starlit section of city like a black fog, he started to make out what might have been shapes in the dark. Again he lamented to loss of his powers, knowing they could easily be fabrications of his anxiety.

Once the shapes in the dark started to move, he knew it wasn't anxiety. All of a sudden, people started rushing out of the gloom; a rabid army of what looked like ordinary people sent into a frenzied rage, brandishing tyre irons, lengths of pipe, planks with nails and a panoply of sporting equipment. They came spilling out of the darkness like a wave.

"Oh shi—"

\*\*\*

The eye orb returned from the portal, its red shield gone and looking much the worse for wear, like half-melted ice cream in a flavour that no one wanted. Chen conjured the cauldron again and the orb disappeared into it. As it did, the information it had gathered entered into Chen's mind.

"I see," he said. "It seems that there are several challenges to safely traversing the space beyond the portal. One is a pervasive and powerful aura. It is definitely silver rank but for raw strength, it rivals a gold-rank aura."

"That sounds like Asano's aura," Gerling said. "I tried to suppress it when we fought. It was like trying to crush an egg in your hand, only to realise it's a stone."

"I cannot be certain," Chen said. "The senses of my scouting orb were completely blocked. It could only detect the forces that pressed upon it directly. This is the second problem: I believe that essence powers are suppressed on the other side of the portal. My summon remained intact, so anything already in place is likely to remain, but I doubt new powers can be used."

"That's dangerous," Miss Li said.

“But not a deal-breaker,” Gerling said. “Even without powers, a gold-ranker puts most comic book characters to shame.”

“Agreed,” Chen said. “The final problem, however, is the most pressing. I believe that the space beyond the portal is, for lack of a better term, a mix of reality and unreality. From what my orb could make out of the forces working upon it, reality is in an uncertain state within the dome.”

“Like being inside Schrödinger’s box,” Miss Li said.

“Yes,” Chen said. “It’s as if the space on the other side of the portal is attempting to make things exist and not exist at the same time.”

“How does Asano withstand it?” Miss Li asked.

“One more secret he brought back from the other world,” Gerling said. “You can add it to the list.”

“What do we do if we encounter Asano?” Chen asked Miss Li. “Secure him?”

“No,” Miss Li said. “Help him. He’s consistently maintained that he’s trying to prevent some manner of doomsday and our analysts believe the probability of that being the case is high. So long as you are in there, if you meet him, help him. Otherwise, ascertain what gains can be made, with reality cores being the priority. For the first trip, scout and return. Once we have a better idea of what is in there we can plan accordingly.”

“Assuming we can get in there at all,” Gerling said. “Are your shields up to the task?”

“I believe I have what we need,” Chen said. “I have a shield that can protect against abnormal dimensional effects. The only drawback is that it consumes the shielded person’s mana to negate the forces it blocks. I can place this ability on each of us before we go in but the mana consumption will likely be large. I can’t supplement that, so you will need to manage your own mana. If you stray from the portal, make sure that you have enough to get back to it in time.”

\*\*\*

The wave of people flooded out of the gloom with roaring screams, descending on Jason. He didn’t even consider trying to fight the horde pouring down the street, immediately turning to run. He made for the pagoda but even as he did, his aura senses picked up more people appearing from thin air in the buildings around him. They rushed out through doors and even leapt through windows, sending glass shattering. Even being on the upper floors didn’t perturb them as they launched themselves out of second, third even fourth floors, with more leaping right off of rooftops.

Jason was startled by their berserker rage that left them with no sense of self-preservation. Many were dying or crippling themselves as they launched from high places,

with the survivors dragging themselves forward if they had to. Jason's first thought was that they were the people caught in the transformation zone, but to his senses they were identical to the living anomalies he had faced in the building. They might all seem like normal, if rabid people, but their auras were in no way human.

None of the people seemed to be spawning inside the pagoda but Jason was cut off before he could reach it as more of the horde streamed around the sides. He immediately swerved and dashed into an alley, the frenzied mob on his heels. They weren't a match for his silver rank speed but they were much faster than normal humans. Jason paused as one of them dropped down from the roof to hit the ground hard in front of him, then leapt over the berserk man's grasping arms to keep running.

His system had warned Jason that the living anomalies would become stronger. Instead, they seemed as weak or weaker, without any bizarre monstrous forms. Instead, they had strength in numbers. Jason went from fighting a few at a time in the hotel to facing what was easily hundreds, keenly feeling the absence of his powers.

Emerging from the other end of the alley, he found more of the mob bearing down on him. He started to use his cloud construct, condensing his mist shroud into small steps that let him climb through the air where they couldn't follow. He headed for a second storey window where he didn't sense any of the horde, only for one to appear in a flash of rainbow light as he reached it, already charging. It crashed through the glass and tackled him out of the air, sending them both falling to the ground below.

## Chapter 414

### Instinct is All We Have

Sprawled on the ground, Jason was hammered by a crowd of people-shaped anomalies with planks and pipes and cricket bats. His sword had skewered one of them right through the face, and it fell on top of him. Using it as a shield, he pushed up to his feet, although the corpse made a poor barrier. Attacks continued to rain down from every direction, pummelling his head, back and arms. One of the anomalies even bit into him like a zombie.

- 
- You have been afflicted with [Streptococcus].
  - You have resisted.
  
  - You have been afflicted with [Reality Dysphoria].
  - You already possess a gestalt physical/spiritual nature.
  - [Reality Dysphoria] has no effect.

---

Jason burst out of the crowd, running before too much of the anomaly horde crowded around him. He barrelled through groups of three or four charging at him while avoiding larger clusters as he sprinted for the pagoda. Even so, he continued to take repeated blows as he blasted past the anomalies.

He was reminded of his first fight with a silver-ranker when his team fought the archbishop of Purity, Nicholas Hendren. Their bronze-rank attacks seemed futile as he took hit after hit without slowing down. Jason absently wondered if the rabid anomalies felt the same frustration as he continued blowing past them. He doubted they had much capacity to think at all.

Jason's domain beyond the pagoda wasn't that large and, even impeded, he was moving with silver rank speed. He neared the pagoda swiftly but there was a crowd of anomalies around it as if they had anticipated his retreat. Not slowing down, Jason started condensing his mist shroud into steps, running over the head of the anomalies and onto the second-floor balcony.

- 
- You have abandoned your incomplete spirit domain territory while anomalies are present.
  
  - Your spirit domain will retract over time until you return or all anomalies are destroyed.

- If anomalies remain when all non-territory domain space has reverted to genesis space, anomalies will be able to attack your completed territory.
- 

“Oh, strewth,” Jason complained, rolling his shoulders painfully. None of the attacks had been critical but he felt like he’d been run over by a car. He was rapidly healing though, with the bite mark on his arm already closed. He turned to look out as the crowd of anomalies gathering like a sea around his pagoda. At least he could no longer sense new one spawning, although perhaps they would if he went back out.

“How am I going to deal with...”

He trailed off as he sensed a new presence emerge from the portal, quickly followed by three more.

“Ask and ye shall receive, I guess.”

Jason moved inside from the balcony and over to the elevator that provided an alternative to the stairs, pressing the button.

“I don’t know how they managed to get in, but I’ll take it.”

\*\*\*

Chen arrived through the portal, followed by Gerling and then the other two category fours from China. Guo was one of China’s weakest category fours, having earned his place in the program through family connections and was not widely respected by the others. The more capable Tran was Vietnamese, one of many talented essence users poached by China over the years.

They looked around at the dark crystal room with the wall planters as they adjusted to the effects of the space. There was a white wooden door but no windows, while light came from a crystal set into the ceiling. Their mana was rapidly being consumed by the shields that Chen had placed on them, but a category four’s mana pool was deep and being constantly replenished by their recovery attribute. It wasn’t enough to remain perpetually, but they would have a decent amount of freedom to explore.

Their powers were sealed off, yet the place was oddly comfortable. In the normal world, the low quality of magic meant that only the power of the reality cores sustained them, while the magic in this place was far richer. Aside from that was an aura pressing in on them that Gerling recognised. Like Jason had been on first arriving, their auras were completely suppressed and the ability to extend their aura senses with them. Only because the aura was imposing itself on them could they detect it.

“Asano,” Gerling muttered.

None of them were able to exercise their own auras, making resisting the aura pressing on them unpleasant, but it didn’t have any deleterious effect.

“Curious,” Chen said, looking around. “This doesn’t look anything like the agrarian land that the dome originally covered. Additionally, this room appears to have been built specifically to house the portal.”

They glanced at the still-open portal and the rainbow light within. They had all dropped into it, yet found themselves walking out of an archway. It was a disorienting switch, especially in addition to the normal queasiness and disorientation of passing through a portal.

"We're on the clock," Gerling said. "Let's go looking around."

The normal procedure for the factions on entering a fresh transformation zone was to scour it for the reality core. This was usually an easy task due to the cores lighting up like a beacon to magical senses. The hope was that this still-changing transformation zone would have more cores but cut off from their magical senses they couldn’t detect anything.

“Agreed,” Chen said. “We should remain as a group, at least until we have a better idea of what we’re dealing wi—”

He stopped as the door was flung open to reveal Jason Asano.

“Right, you lot,” Jason demanded. “Come with me.”

He turned to leave when Guo called out to him.

“You don’t tell us what to do, Asano.”

Jason turned back, pointed an arm at the portal and then closed his fist. The rainbow light in the portal vanished as it was sealed.

“I do now.”

Guo used his gold rank reflexed to grab Jason by the neck, dash across the hall outside the room and slam him into the wall.

“You think I can’t make you do whatever I want?”

Jason looked at Guo calmly, even as he was held against the wall by the throat, feet dangling. His voice was in no way choked off as he spoke.

“While I have no doubt you have a gleeful aptitude for cruelty, I’ve been tortured by the bloke who creates universes. Whatever you can do to me, I promise you that I’ve been through worse. Those shields won’t last forever, so, yeah; I don’t think you can make me do whatever you want. Now, put me down or I leave you in here until you dissolve like a soluble aspirin.”

Guo’s hand closed tighter on Jason’s neck.

“You’ll die here too.”

“I’ve died before. It never seems to stop me.”

“Guo, that’s enough!” Chen barked. He had let Guo off his leash long enough to get the measure of Asano and had found himself impressed. Guo would be an acceptable price to pay for the assistance of someone who clearly understood the space more than they did. Chen would happily kill Guo himself in trade for some of Asano’s secrets.

Guo reluctantly let Jason go, who dropped to the floor. Chen saw the heavy indentations of Guo's hand already healing on Jason's neck in a display of healing speed that rivalled a gold ranker.

“Do you have your powers?” Gerling asked, having noticed the same thing.

“No, but I have a little aura control.”

“A little bit?” Gerling asked, still feeling the power of Jason’s aura overwhelming the room.

“That’s not me,” Jason said. “That’s the place we’re in.”

“Why does this place have your aura?” Chen asked.

“Because I’m taking it over,” Jason said. “The proto space and the transformation zone aren’t playing nice. The instability is going to leave a wound in the side of the universe if we let it fester. I’m stabilising this place as best I can.”

“How?” Gerling asked.

“Yeah, because I’m going to tell you that,” Jason said. “Look, as I see it, you’ve got three options. One, you kill me, I come back to life and get on with saving the world while your shields crap out and you all die. I don’t know if you can come back from that, that’s your business. Two, you all sod off looking for loot, although I haven’t spotted any reality cores, so good luck. Then you eventually die. Three, you do what I say, maybe we save the world and I let you all out.”

“What guarantee do we have that you won’t just leave us in here anyway?” Gerling asked.

“Oh, I’m going to kill you, if you live long enough,” Jason said. “But not today. The Cabal is under new management and I think we all know that war is inevitable. You’re going to explode a lot of vampires before I put you down. Now, you’re not the only ones on a clock, so get your arses in gear and come with me.”

\*\*\*

Jason rode the elevator in his magic interdimensional pagoda, along with four powerful magicians, including the man who killed his brother.

"I used to work in retail stationery," he mused. "It's been an odd few years."

“Since we have agreed to help you,” Chen said, “would you be willing to offer a little reciprocation?”

“For help saving the world that you live on?” Jason asked pointedly. “What exactly do you have in mind?”

“You have repeatedly claimed that you are acting to save the world and our people are inclined to believe you. Beyond stating that claiming reality cores works against this end, however, you have offered up little information about the nature of the threat and how you will go about stopping it.”

“I’ll admit that I’ve been high-handed with my information,” Jason said. “That’s because I didn’t want people like you trying to use me once you found out what you could use me for. With the events of today, though, I think its safe to say that I’m now squarely in everyone’s attention.”

The elevator reached the ground floor and they stepped out, the gold-rankers looking around at the opulent atrium with the waterfall dropping into the middle of the floor.

“I’ve been trying to prevent a disaster from destroying our world,” Jason said. “This place threatens to accelerate that disaster precipitously. Once it’s dealt with, I’ll explain everything. From a safe distance.”

“I appreciate the concession,” Chen said. “What needs doing now?”

Jason pointed to the stone double doors.

“Outside there is a lot of things that look like angry people, but aren’t. They aren’t very strong but there’s a lot of them. We have to kill them all.”

\*\*\*

When Jason gestured at the doors and they swung open, the four gold-rankers shot out like missiles, with appropriately explosive results. Given the space to move around and swing his sword, Jason could quickly carve through the weak anomalies but the gold rankers were so powerful that the tighter they clustered the better.

Gerling didn’t have his explosion powers but it was hard to tell as a single swing of his fist burst two or even three anomaly heads like an overripe melon being hit by a baseball bat. The Vietnamese man, Tran, moved in swift, jerking motions, efficiently striking out with his fist like a boxer. His hands never stopped moving as he moved through the anomalies like a threshing machine.

Chen was even more clinical, wiping out anomalies faster than anyone. With his fingers clustered together like a bird’s beak, his hands pecked holed in the faces of anomalies, with two more being killed before the first hit the ground. Chen and Tran both demonstrated that not every essence user from Earth lacked the skill to match their power. The other Chinese gold-ranker was clearly the least capable of the group but even he was a force to be reckoned with by dint of raw power.

Jason participated, cleaning up the more scattered anomalies after the others passed through the crowd like a hurricane. Even with the gold rankers hammering away, there was no shortage of leftovers given the sheer numbers, Jason's sword flickered in the starlight, reaping anomalies at a pace that almost matched the weakest of the gold rankers.

Soon the ground was painted with the grim remnants of the anomalies, which appeared human when intact but were revealed to be human-shaped masses of flesh once their facades were blasted apart by the violent attacks of the gold-rankers. Looking around, Jason reflected on the fact that his own body was much the same.

They cleared out the open spaces and started going after the ones still in the buildings, with Jason directing the others to where he sensed them. More of the anomalies continued to spawn, but they seemed to do so at a rate commensurate with the number of live anomalies that had already invaded Jason's domain. When the place had been swarming, that swarm rapidly grew, the spawn rate diminishing as the gold-rankers aggressively thinned-out the numbers. After Jason sensed the last anomaly fall, he moved to the edge of his domain where it met the dark fog of gloom to be certain.

- 
- You are at the border of your spirit domain. Minimum cost to expand: 78 [Stable Genesis Cores].
  - Maximum strength of non-anomalies in your domain: gold-rank. On expanding your domain, anomaly strength will be proportional to the most powerful non-anomaly present.
  - You have insufficient cores to expand your domain.
- 

Since the domain could be expanded, that meant the existing anomalies were finished. That the next set of anomalies would be gold-rank if the gold-rank essence users remained was not completely a surprise, as Jason had already postulated that the space was reacting to his rank.

Gerling and Chen approached him as Guo and Tran were examined the dead anomalies.

"So it's done?" Gerling asked.

"Hmm?" Jason said, looking up distractedly from his system window. "No, it's barely begun. But you three have to leave. I'll open the portal back up."

"We can return, once we've replenished our mana," Chen said.

"No," Jason said. "I have to continue stabilising the zone and if you're here, the next lot of these things will be scaled to your power, not mine."

“Can we not leave, have you trigger the next set of them and then return?”

“Maybe,” Jason acknowledged. “A loophole that makes things that easy makes me suspicious, though. We might have gotten away with it once, but I’m not sure that this place would keep doing it.”

“You say that like this place has an intelligence,” Chen said.

“I don’t know about intelligence,” Jason said, “but I do know that cosmic forces can have a will. I’ve experienced it for myself. There’s something about this place. It’s like the fractured dream of a wounded animal, lashing out in its nightmare.”

“That seems like a jump,” Gerling said.

“Yeah,” Jason admitted. “But we’re through the looking glass, here. Sometimes instinct is all we have, even if it’s unreliable, and I don’t think trying to loophole a gaping wound in reality is a risk I want to take.”

“And if I do?” Gerling asked.

“Then you’re an idiot,” Jason said. “And for all you’re a huge bogan-looking prick, I don’t think you are.”

“What’s a bogan?”

“Hey!” Tran called out, striding towards the group with something bloody in his hands. “Don’t listen to him. This is why he wants us gone.”

## Chapter 415

### Step Back

Standing in the middle of the street, Jason looked at the spheres Tran was holding, still bloody from where they had been ripped out of the anomalies. Looking around, it wasn't hard to spot more given the thoroughness with which many anomalies had been dealt with. The spheres were the size of the genesis cores Jason had been using, but instead of rainbow colours, the energy swirling within was black and red. Jason suspected that the process of looting them, rather than ripping them directly out of corpses, changed the cores. Since the cores he used were specifically stable genesis cores, it was likely these others were the unstable variety.

"These," Tran said, holding one in each hand. "I bet these are the secret of this place."

"This place has a lot of secrets," Jason said.

"As do you, Mr Asano," Chen said.

"I bet this is how he imprints himself on this place," Guo said, coming up behind Tran. He also had a bloody core in each hand.

"Guo," Chen said. "Perhaps you should see if you can't claim some of this place for yourself, the way Mr Asano had. You're so much stronger than him, after all, so it shouldn't be a problem."

Any essence user understood instinctively how to use actively use items, simply trickling a little mana into them. Even with all their essence abilities sealed that didn't change.

"I would very strongly recommend against attempting using those cores," Jason said.

"You just want me to play test subject," Guo said, tossing the spheres at Chen who neatly stepped aside.

"I'll do it," Tran said. "Anything this Japanese can do, I can do better."

"Oh, racism," Jason said. "I'm sure that's going to help. Look, mate, you'll probably blow up or something. There's a bunch of conditions you need to meet before you can start claiming territory here, none of which you meet."

"You're just trying to hide the benefits you're taking for yourself," Tran said.

"So much for believing me about saving the world," Jason muttered and gestured at Gerling. "If someone absolutely has to have a go, have this guy do it."

"No chance," Gerling said.

"You'll probably be fine," Jason told him.

“No one is going to do anything with these spheres,” Chen declared, only to be proven wrong as red light surged from the spheres in Tran’s hands. Guo, Gerling and Chan looked on while Jason ducked into an alley before peering around the corner.

“Tran, don’t be a fool,” Chen said. “Stop this now.”

“Aren’t you sick of being a slave to reality cores?” Tran asked as the red glow spread from the spheres to engulf him. “We should be taking a cue from the vampires. We have the power. We should be in charge.”

“We have a larger duty,” Chen said, even as he backed off. Guo and Gerling did the same. As they watched, the red light stopped spreading and was instead drawn into Tran’s body. His body started bulging oddly, as if balloons were inflating inside it.

“I think he’s going to explode or go full Cronenberg,” Jason yelled in warning. Guo, Chen and Gerling retreated to the alley with Jason.

“What does Cronenberg mean?” Guo asked.

“We have more important matters to pay attention to,” Chen said. Tran had fallen to the ground and was thrashing around, screaming.

“He’s talking about David Cronenberg,” Gerling said.

“The man from *Star Trek: Discovery*?” Guo asked.

“That’s where you know him from?” Jason asked incredulously. “Weren’t you in a fridge for years?”

“I like Star Trek,” Guo said defensively.

“He was in, what?” Jason asked. “Two episodes?”

“Episodes five, nine and thirteen of season three,” Guo said.

“Seriously?” Gerling asked.

“I like Star Trek,” Guo said again.

“Focus!” Chen snapped.

“Okay, I don’t think your guy’s going to blow up,” Jason said. “His aura’s changing into something.”

“Into what?” Gerling growled. Having his powerful aura senses barely functional felt like being blinded.

“Definitely some kind of anomaly,” Jason said. “This place is taking him over. He’s not the same as all these things we just killed though. It almost feels like... oh, that’s probably bad.”

“What?” Gerling snarled.

“Based on his aura, I think he’s somewhere between anomaly and vampire,” Jason said.

“How is that possible?” Guo asked.

“We’re in the land of make-believe and you idiots started poking random stuff,” Jason said. “He could have turned into Starscream.”

“What is a star scream?” Chen asked.

“Screw this,” Gerling said and rushed out. Tran’s body had returned to a normal-looking state and he stopped thrashing and screaming, laying still on the ground. Gerling ran up and stomped his foot down hard on Tran’s chest, only for Tran to transform into mist. All Gerling’s foot smashed down on were now-empty clothes. The mist cloud moved away and reformed into Tran’s physical body, with red eyes, no clothes and a manic, predator grin.

“Go,” Chen ordered and also rushed out, Guo close behind. Jason remained in the alley.

Gerling met vampire Tran’s eyes and then collapsed to his knees, gripping in his head in both hands as he let out a roar of rage and pain. Tran’s hands grew into claws as Guo and Chen attacked, Guo getting raked across the face before Chen sent Tran flying through the air with a kick to the chest.

Chen's gold-rank strength sent Tran flying, but Tran's gold-rank agility allowed him to flip in the air and land in a crouch, facing Chen, who was already charging. Tran spat out a swiftly-spreading blood mist but Chen used his momentum to leap over it. Tran raked his own arm with a claw, sending an unnatural amount of blood spraying into the air. The blood droplets transmuted into a swarm of knuckle-sized mosquitos, latching onto Chen as he dropped from the air. Then Tran was hit by a flying car.

Gerling had shaken off the mental attack, looked at the blood mist and grabbed the first thing that came to hand, which was an automobile. It slammed Tran into a building and through the wall.

As Chen scraped off the mosquitos that had latched into his flesh, blood sprayed out with each one he tore away, Guo, with his slashed face and Gerling approached the hole in what was now a half-collapsed wall with a car sticking out of it.

“Watch out,” Jason called as he sensed a cluster of anomalies spawn inside the building and a large pack of hyenas poured out of the hole to attack the three gold-rankers. They were much faster and stronger than ordinary hyenas, jumping on Chen, who was still distracted by the mosquitos and Guo, who was just slower to react. The obliviousness of not having their usual senses was hurting them.

Gerling dodged one charging hyena, pivoting his body to punt it away with a kick. The next hyena leapt at him and he grabbed it by the upper and lower jaw before ripping it clean in half.

Tran followed the hyenas out of the hole, holding up a hand that had a fanged mouth set into the palm. A nine-foot tongue shot out like a whip, flicking towards Gerling. Gerling snatched it out of the air, only for fangs to stab out of the tongue and piercing his hand. Blood flowed from the small wounds abnormally fast and was soaked into the tongue. Gerling ignored it and yanked on the tongue, pulling Tran towards him.

He lunged forward to meet the stumbling Tran with his fist, only for Tran to turn to mist and wash right over Gerling, reforming behind him. The mist left a caustic residue on Gerling's skin, which Gerling also ignored like his other wounds. Spinning to attack again, Gerling was caught out when Tran threw back his head and let out a horrifying shriek, high and glass-shatteringly piercing.

Gerling was staggered as blood ran from his ears and he stumbled, off-balance. Jason, still watching from a distance, was only silver-rank and was far more affected by the shriek, clutching his head briefly before blacking out.

\*\*\*

Jason came to as he rapidly healed the damage, although he still couldn't hear and it felt like a spike had been driven through his head. Still disoriented, he wondered how he was even affected like that since he was long past hearing via a vulnerable eardrum.

Pushing himself to his feet, his head cleared enough to remember the situation at hand. Chen and Guo were both tethered to the ground by red chains as they fended off the attacks of the hyena pack.

Gerling was still fighting Tran but was the worse for wear. They had similar gold-rank attributes and were similar in combat skill. The difference was that Tran had vampire powers, while Gerling's powers remained sealed away.

Gerling fought well but Tran had tricks to escape whenever Gerling threatened heavy damage, while Gerling could not boast the same. The gold-ranker looked like Jason felt, bloody and beaten, yet he struggled defiantly on.

Jason wasn't fool enough to try and help without pulling out the trump card he really, really didn't want to but it was clear that the gold-rankers were going to lose. Gerling was suffering some kind of affliction, most likely the vampiric transformation curse. If enough of it affected him he would turn into a vampiric minion and Jason didn't have his cleansing power to stop it. Unhappily, Jason drew his sword and took a fist-sized lump of golden crystal from his inventory.

One of Tran's claw hands savagely slashed Gerling's arm, leaving it hanging limp. Tran grabbed the other arm, yanked it and slammed a fist into the elbow, bending it the wrong way. After pair of brutal knee strikes to the chest, Gerling doubled over and Tran bit into his neck.

Jason stepped out, striding towards the group fight, holding the crystal above his head and sending a trickle of mana into it.

---

Item: [True Light] (diamond rank, rare)

*True light of the sun, trapped in a single moment (consumable, crystallised light).*

➤ Effect: Consume to release the true light of the Sun.

---

Vampires were largely unaffected by the sunlight of Earth because it lacked magical strength. The diamond-rank light shining from the crystal was an entirely different matter and Jason felt the vampiric Tran's aura melt away like an ice cube under the hot sun as the crystal started emitting light.

The animals dissolved and scattered like mist in the wind, the chains binding Guo and Chan broke apart and melted into gobbets of thick, hot blood. Tran staggered, the diamond-rank sunlight making a mockery of his gold-rank strength. He struggled even to stand as Jason marched up, channelling aura into his sword.

The sword cut Tran's head clean off and Jason sent the body sprawling onto its back with a kick to the chest. After kicking the head away from the body, he moved over the fallen Tran's torso as he tossed his sword into the air and caught it in a backhand grip. After plunging it into the vampire's chest, he yanked the sword back and forth to make a hole. He shoved the light crystal into the vampire's chest cavity, right up against the heart.

As Jason stepped back, sunlight shone from within Tran's body, right through the skin. It started burning white-hot, from the inside out. The light of the crystal died after only a few moments but the damage was done and the vampire continued to burn.

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➤ You have defeated [Reality-Dysphoric Anomaly].

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Jason watched the body blacken as Gerling, Chen and Guo recovered. The flames died out and Jason crouched to examine the body.

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➤ Would you like to loot [Reality-Dysphoric Anomaly]?

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“It seems we owe you debt, Mr Asano,” Chen said. “I’m glad you have secrets enough still to resolve our situation.”

Jason slowly stood, his body stiff, turning to reveal a face twisted with anger and coated in blood spatter.

“Do you have any idea what I just gave up?” he demanded furiously. “Do you know what we could have done with that? The day will come when all those ancient vampires outside decide that they want to run the show and the thing I just used to save your worthless hides would have been our best weapon. We could have baited them into a massive conflict and used it to cripple enough of them that we could maybe even end it all in one stroke! You came because you wanted a head start on plundering this place and you’ve condemned the world to a war worse than it had any need to be.”

Chen looked contemplative, Guo looked angry and Gerling actually looked a little ashamed.

“You think I wanted to save you?” Jason asked. “I halfway contemplated letting him kill you all first and if I wasn’t worried about you pricks all turning into vampire minions I probably would have. The only reason I used that crystal was that without taking him down, I couldn’t finish the job I came in here to do.”

He turned to look at the pagoda’s upper floors, closed his eyes and then opened them again.

“The portal is open. Go, and don’t come back.”

Guo took a step toward Jason but Chen stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

“You might need us again,” Gerling said.

“Not worth the risk,” Jason said. “I don’t have a magic crystal for every time you cause more problems than you solve.”

“Mr Asano,” Chen said. “If we do not return with something to show for our efforts – and our loss – then it will be hard to convince our people not to come after you the moment you leave this place.”

“You’re going to do that whatever you bring back,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Chen said. “But there is a difference between seeking an opportunity and needing to salvage at least something from a costly debacle. Take a step back and give our people some face; allow us to take back some of these cores from the anomalies. Then we can step back in turn and not pursue you as furiously as we otherwise might.”

Jason looked from Chen to the dead Tran and back.

“Are you serious?” Jason asked. “You want cores after what they did to him?”

“They are dangerous, yes, but powerful,” Chen said. “Unless you have some reality cores to offer instead,” Chen said.

“Do you see any reality cores lying around?” Jason asked.

“No, but my senses are sealed. Yours are not.”

“Just take some of the bloody things and go,” Jason said.

“We will be taking the body of our fallen companion as well,” Chen said. As soon as he did, Tran started dissolving into rainbow smoke.

“I’ve stepped back far enough, Mr Chen.”

## Chapter 416

### Guns & Money

Jason, Chen, Guo and Gerling walked in the direction of the pagoda, through streets painted with dead anomalies.

“Just to be clear, you are renouncing any claim you might have to these bodies, outside of taking a few cores,” Jason said. His tone made it clear that it wasn’t a question.

A quirk of Jason’s looting ability was that he could only loot his own or unattended kills. It was likely that once the gold-rankers left, all the anomalies would count as unattended but he wanted to make sure they relinquished the rights to them. He didn’t want to risk being unable to loot enough cores to keep expanding his spirit domain.

“Of course,” Chen said. Jason knew that Chen had gleaned some insight into the nature of Jason’s ability from the exchange but that wasn’t enough to risk losing all the cores.

Around the pagoda was the area where the dead anomalies were at their thickest, having gathered around it while waiting for Jason and the others to emerge. They had done so in a storm of violence, leaving a sea of the dead. Picking their way through the bodies, Guo gathered up a half-dozen of the unstable black and red cores in his arms. Chen only took a pair of them, one in each hand. He looked at Guo carrying so many and was met by a challenging glare.

“What?” Guo asked.

“Nothing,” said Chen, who then glanced at the empty-handed Gerling.

“Aren’t you going to join us, Mr Gerling?”

Gerling looked at Jason, then at the core in Chen’s hands.

“I’m good,” Gerling said.

“I really think you should,” Chen insisted, “if only for the sake of caution.”

Chen’s eyes flicked in Guo’s direction and he shared a look with Gerling.

“Right,” Gerling said. “Need to avoid any mishaps.”

Jason observed the exchange and watched Gerling pick up a pair of cores.

“What are you talking about?” Guo asked.

“Let’s just get out of here,” Gerling said. “I’m running low on mana and I don’t want this shield to crap out.”

Jason led them to the elevator, escorting them up to the portal room. Guo gave Jason a hostile glare.

“We’re going to meet again,” Guo said. “Things will be very different outside your private magic land.”

Not waiting for a response, Guo carried his armload of unstable genesis cores through the portal. The other three watched the portal for reactions but there were no visible changes.

“Should we just leave these cores here?” Chen asked Jason. Having prevented Guo from suspecting the cores might be dangerous to carry through; neither he nor Gerling was going to take the same risk.

“I’ll take them,” Jason said, collecting the cores from Chen and Gerling.

“How long should we wait?” Gerling asked. “If those cores just explode immediately we should be fine, but if they do something weird on the other side, we might want to give it a minute.”

“You don’t have a minute,” Jason said. “Get out or I shut the portal, wait for you to die and then loot your corpses before getting on with what I came here to do.”

“Close that portal on us and we’ll make sure you die before we do,” Gerling said.

Jason flashed him a snake’s grin.

“Are you sure about that?” Jason asked. “Think about what happens when we meet. You try to catch me and I escape immediately. You lose to a vampire and I kill it easily. Are willing to bet your life on my bag of tricks being empty?”

Gerling’s huge frame towered over Jason, who looked up unflinchingly at the face of his brother’s killer. Chen reached up to put a hand on Gerling’s shoulder.

“That should be delay enough,” Chen said. “Mr Asano, I hope the next time we meet it will be as allies. I believe you’re an enemy I would rather not have.”

“Then you should be more discerning in the company you keep. That said, I imagine we will all stand together when the time comes. The vampires are too used to dominance to not try and take over and I suspect their numbers are greater than any of us realised.”

Chen nodded and then stepped through the portal without another word. Gerling gave Jason an angry but conflicted look before following.

\*\*\*

Jason went about the laborious task of touching each of the dead anomalies to loot them. Eventually, the streets were cleared, the anomalies all gone up in rainbow smoke. All that remained were some unstable genesis cores violently expelled from the anomalies and not converted to stable ones when he looted the bodies.

The haul was a huge boost to Jason’s coffers, with ten silver spirit coins and an equivalent value of bronze and iron coming from each one. It reached the point that Jason

was glad spirit coins appeared in his inventory as a simple counter or he'd need a storage pit like Scrooge McDuck.

There were also the expected stable genesis cores, although a good number of unstable ones had already been violently expelled from the anomalies and weren't converted by his loot power.

Aside from the spirit coins and the cores, he looted quite a lot of healing unguent and a handful of other items. There were a few mana potions, as well as a shape-changing potion that would allow for minor physical changes. Jason was familiar with such potions from the other world, although he had never used one. They could be used for disguise or to make more combative modifications, such as claws or bone spikes sticking out from the body. It generally wasn't considered a strong combat tool, but with his powers sealed, Jason would take anything he could get.

Jason's belt was enchanted to protect the potion vials in it from incidental damage. Jason hadn't used it since reaching silver rank because it was only iron-rank and the protections were ineffective against any threat that would push him hard enough to need a potion.

With Jason's abilities replenishing him more effectively than potions, it was only useful as a sword belt and he hadn't been using his sword, either. In his current circumstances, though, Jason was almost entirely reliant on items to boost his combat ability, even if the items were less than ideal.

The other objects he looted seemed to fit the retro-futuristic feel of the city before Jason started transforming it. One was a self-boiling kettle that looked halfway between a coffee machine from the fifties and a cartoon bomb.

"Does this really need to be silver rank?" he wondered, holding it in his hands. He shrugged, remembering that the other world had higher-rank cooking ingredients in high magic areas.

What most caught his eye was the selection of weapons that he looted, nine of them in total. The most attention-grabbing was a very large gun and some kind of bazooka. To Jason, the firearm looked like a steampunk minigun, while the rocket launcher would be at home in a Jetsons spin-off movie where Elroy got drafted and went to war.

Both weapons had a hopper on the top that looked suspiciously well-shaped to accommodate a genesis core. The minigun-looking weapon came complete with a shoulder strap so it could be carried slung and fired from the hip.

---

Item: [Instability Regulator] (silver rank, epic)

*A device that regulates and discharges the energy from unstable genesis cores in a relatively safe manner. For safety reasons, do not discharge device in the direction of nearby people or objects (weapon, gun).*

- **Effect:** Consumes an [Unstable Genesis Core] to fuel powerful energy discharges. Fully depleted cores are transmuted into [Genesis Reclamation Cores].
- 

The description didn't cover what a genesis reclamation core was, but he hoped it would help him accelerate claiming territory for his spirit domain. He had no idea how long the unstable transformation zone would hold together before it collapsed and tore a hole in the side of the universe.

Jason turned his attention to the bazooka.

---

**Item:** [Instability Agitator] (silver rank, uncommon)

*A weapon that further destabilises unstable genesis cores, shrouds them in a short-lived containment field and then launches them (weapon, grenade launcher).*

- **Effect:** Converts an [Unstable Genesis Core] into an explosive projectile.
- 

To Jason's mind, it was inferior to the minigun weapon, although if he needed to blow up something really big, it might be useful. He thought of the vast and distant silhouettes he had seen from the roof of his pagoda and realised that he would probably need a bigger bazooka.

The remaining weapons consisted of three identical ray gun pistols that looked right out of Buck Rogers, two in belt holsters and the other in a shoulder holster. There were two rifles, one in an old-school ray gun design like the pistols and one that had no barrel at all. He picked that one up to examine. It was largely silvery-metallic with rounded components, an aesthetic that continued to the orb on the end of a rod it had instead of a barrel.

---

**Item:** [Arc Rifle] (silver rank, rare)

*Lightning rifle (weapon, grenade launcher).*

- **Effect:** Consume mana to attack using electricity. Has a chance to chain attacks to secondary targets.
- 
- **Effect:** Has a chance to inflict [Muscle Paralysis] on targets with musculature or equivalent organic functionality.
- 
- **Effect:** Has a chance to deliver an electromagnetic surge to electronic devices.

---

“Lightning gun,” Jason said reverently. He immediately tested it out, firing a wild blast of blue-white lightning down the street. The arc bent in the air to strike a car by the side of the road.

“Homing lightning,” Jason said with a huge grin. The weapon consumed a large amount of mana even from a short burst, however. “Let’s call it an awesomeness tax.”

The arc rifle had a bandolier it came with that didn’t seem to attach to the gun in any way. Instead, it had some metal disks, the purpose of which Jason was unsure of until he spent some time examining them and realised they were magnetic.

Jason put on the bandolier and slung the arc rifle onto his back where it neatly clamped into place. He pulled out the rifle and stowed it on his back multiple times, finding that quickly grabbing it or putting it away was easy and reliable. It always seemed to find the magnetic grips and was held in place with just the right amount of force.

Given the smoothness of the action, he suspected the grips had some magic assistance for ease of use. Jason appreciated that more than a magic gun with extra features that might never get used. During his time on Earth, he had looted a lot of guns which he had handed over to the Network, many of which had pointless peripheral effects.

The last two weapons were for melee combat. One was a heavy iron gauntlet that went up to the elbow. It had similar effects to the lightning gun but with less mana consumption and the ability to serve as armour. It was far too bulky for Jason though, so it was quickly dropped into his inventory. The last weapon was an electrified rod, only a little shorter than his sword. He already had his sword, so it likewise went into the inventory.

After some debate, Jason risked trying to store unstable orbs in his inventory and found they were perfectly fine, even stacking safely in a single inventory slot and not occupying a lot of space. Then the heavy weapons went in.

The pistols he equipped directly. The two in belt holsters went on his right hip and back, with his sword remaining on his left hip. He then slung on the shoulder holster for the third.

---

Item: [Pulse Blaster] (silver rank, common)

*Energy pistol* (weapon, pistol).

- Effect: Fires a blast of energy at the cost of mana. Basic blasts are an efficient balance of power to mana cost.
  - 
  - Effect: Change up mana to fire a powerful but mana-inefficient blast.
-

Jason had tried magic guns in the past. He had never used them in combat because his powers were always the superior choice, but he was capable enough. Even at bronze-rank, the proprioception and reflexes of his speed attribute combined with the spatial awareness and sharp senses of his spirit attribute had been formidable. Although he would be no match for a practised expert, now that his attributes were silver-rank, he was confident he would adapt quickly.

With a small arsenal of guns at his disposal, Jason was much more confident about facing down another horde of anomalies. Ranged attack options and the ability to pull out the heavy weapons meant that, so long as he was careful, even a huge wave should be manageable. That was assuming, he reminded himself, that the next wave of anomalies was as weak as the last one.

The last items Jason had to look at were the two that came from looting the gold-ranker-turned-vampire, Tran. Looting powers on low-rankers only rifled through their possessions and dimensional storage space, if they had one. High-rakers, including Jason himself, were different. From a purely physical perspective, there was little difference between the body of a gold-ranker and a monster and looting powers affected them the same way.

Many silver-rankers and even some bronze rankers also had monster-like bodies made of what amounted to congealed magic. Jason himself had been like that from his very arrival in the other world, although his low-rank body had been made up of very impure magic. He still remembered passing out as his body instigated a massive purge on reaching iron-rank.

Along with the usual pile of coins, Jason had looted two items from Tran. The first was a black and red bracelet, which he looted directly, while the second was produced by Jason's outworlder ability, defiant, which gave him extra loot from powerful enemies. That item was a lamp made from silver and gold, with sapphire settings.

Neither item was useful to Jason in the immediacy but he anticipated both being valuable once he left the transformation zone behind. He put them in his inventory and turned his attention to once more expanding his domain.

## Chapter 417

### Old Habit

Jason expanded his spirit domain from atop a building, covered in guns and fully prepared to leap off into a superhero landing and start mowing down anomalies. His domain expanded out, adding more cityscape to Jason's incomplete second territory. The transformed landscape blended dark crystal construction with much brighter elements reminiscent of his cloud house. It also continued to bring more plant life into being, from rows of trees running down the streets to a garden-filled park.

As the newly-claimed space was more city, Jason was anticipating another wave of urban-variant angry villagers which turned out not to be the case. When the anomalies arrived they were still human, but far fewer in number. Dressed in spacesuit-like outfits, they were armed with the same kind of weapons Jason had looted from the last set of anomalies. He didn't spot either of the heavy weapons fuelled by genesis cores, but most were wielding the same blaster rifle he had looted from the last set of anomalies. He spotted one holding a copy of the devastating lightning gun.

Although the anomalies were only a fragment of what came before, it was still far from a small number. Jason's aura senses extended across his domain and he sensed them emerging all the way around what was becoming the vast circumference of his expanding territory. He wondered how vast it would be before his second territory was complete.

The new anomalies weren't just different from the previous ones in outfit and weaponry but also behaviour. Instead of rabidly tearing off to search Jason out, they were smarter and more cautious moving in small groups, observing their surroundings with guns at the ready. Rather than make the splashy entrance he had originally intended, Jason retreated down through the building, a four-floor department store. As he made his way down, he paused after spotting a poster in the menswear section advertising the Bertinelli Collection. It wasn't the time to go browsing clothes, so he moved on.

"I have to check that out after I have this shootout with a small army of astronauts."

He paused again.

"I know the fate of the world is at stake and I might die, but sometimes I just love my life."

\*\*\*

Jason waited for a group of the astronauts to walk past the doors of the department store before he approached the doors himself, causing the motion sensor to slide them

open. He briefly peppered the astronauts with blasts from the pistols held in each of his hands before ducking out of the way as they swung their weapons to return fire.

Of the group of five, Jason had taken out two with headshots before they started reacting, the energy from his guns blasting apart their helmets. His remaining shots were wild covering shots as he dashed out of the way, landing only glancing hits. The remaining three anomalies moved into the store, panning the room with their guns.

The first floor was ladies' wear and Jason crouched down as he moved amongst racks of clothes. He sheathed his pistols and drew his sword as he pulled up his tactical map outworlder ability. It wasn't something that he used a lot but was perfect for a complex environment where he needed to track enemies with more precision than just his aura senses.

Jason could already sense more anomalies approaching the store, drawn by the gunfire. The retro sci-fi blasters weren't as loud as ordinary guns firing supersonic slugs but neither were they quiet. He needed to take out the group he had already started on before more of them arrived.

He emerged behind the astronauts as they moved down a tight row, sliding his blade into the back of the rearmost one's neck. By the time the other two heard it drop dead, Jason was already gone as they stopped in place, swivelling their guns back and forth. Since they were kind enough to stop moving, Jason took advantage by popping back up and shooting each of them in the head with a single pistol blast.

Jason may not have had his cloak to blend into the shadows but he still had years of experience being a predator. The second group to arrive were killed without firing a shot. Jason then left the building as too many of the anomalies were converging on it. Making his way through the streets, dodging groups of anomalies, he went to the far side of his domain and lured more of the astronauts into a building to be killed off.

He repeated the pattern several times, moving to new areas and wiping out two or three groups before abandoning his position. It didn't always go perfectly and several times he holed up to rub healing unguent onto a wound but he was operating effectively. His concern was the anomalies with the lightning guns, of which he discovered there were three. Scouting them out, he realised that not only did they have the powerful weapons but they looked to have reinforced space suits. How strong they were he could only find out by testing them.

For his first attempt to take one out, Jason attacked on an open street. He picked his ambush location and waited for it to walk past, accompanied by a trio of rifle anomalies. He rose up and fired both pistols, landing multiple hits on the lightning gun anomaly's

head. The bolts struck the slow-moving astronaut's helmet straight on, which was scorched and blacked but not broken. The whole group turned their weapons on Jason, who ducked down and rolled away from the car.

Energy blasts sizzled past Jason or were blocked by the car. The arc from the electricity gun curved to latch onto the car, just as Jason had intended. He had immediately realised on using the lightning gun himself that the homing feature was both a strength and weakness, due to its indiscriminate nature.

Jason had been thorough in picking a spot with a ready escape path. He shot out the glass storefront next to him before dashing inside as energy blasts continued to fire in his direction. He holstered his pistols, pulled the minigun from his inventory. After slinging it over his shoulder he took out an unstable genesis core and dropped it into the hopper on top of the gun.

The moment the first anomaly came into view, Jason opened up with the gun, firing rapid, powerful energy discharges at a blistering pace. It chewed through the visible anomaly before Jason walked the stream of deadly fire back and forth in an arc, blasting through the wall and the anomalies on the other side of it. Jason sensed the all go down immediately, even the armoured spacesuit of the lightning gunner having been ripped apart.

Sensing another group approaching, Jason lugged the heavy weapon back out through the window and turned in their direction. Seeing the mess the gun had made of the anomalies, the car he had been hiding behind and even the wall on the other side of the street he didn't bother with anything tricky. He swung the gun in the direction of the corner they were approaching from and opened up as the anomalies came rushing around it.

Although he was tempted to keep mowing down enemies, the minigun didn't come with a shield. He knew that if enough gathered together they would gun him down like a firing squad, so he returned the gun to his inventory and got moving.

Jason managed to eliminate the other two other groups containing lightning gun wielders in similar fashion, although the last one left him in a bad position. The lightning gun chained an attack from the car Jason used for cover into Jason himself, inflicting him with muscle paralysis even as the minigun tore the anomaly apart.

Jason fell to the ground, barely managing to pull out a pistol to shoot the lightning gun anomaly's companions as they rushed around the car to attack him. He managed to gun them down but took blasts to the leg, shoulder and gut in the process. After chugging one of his few silver-rank healing potions he painfully stowed the minigun and staggered into

an adjacent building and rode its elevator up to the roof, then hit the emergency stop to prevent it from being used to follow him.

As he holed-up, applying healing ointment to his wounds, he sensed the remaining anomalies converging on his location. He had killed most of them by that stage but there was still somewhere in the vicinity of three dozen moving in on him.

Jason had the choice of trying to make a break for it wounded or giving himself time to heal more and the anomalies time to flood the building. He could risk trying to jump off the building, which would normally be fine but he was not going to be fully recovered either way. The risk was only moderate if he let himself heal up a bit but the consequences of getting it wrong were unacceptable. If he wound up crippled in front of a building full of enemies, he was dead.

Deciding the best course was to let the healing unguent do as much work as it could in the time he had, on top of Colin's tireless efforts, he monitored the approaching anomalies using his tactical map ability. Displaying maps of each of the three floors of the office building side by side, he watched as they slowly but surely made their way up, searching for him.

Jason was uncertain of how well he could handle them, given how many of them had come together. He would need to move before they completely converged on the rooftop. While Jason's raw physical and perceptual advantages helped him use guns with superhuman accuracy, he had no grasp of firearms tactics. He had been relying on variations of his usual stealth tactics, essentially treating the pistols as long, loud swords. It played to his strengths but would be less effective against larger groups where hit-and-run tactics would be harder to execute without being pinned down.

Jason pushed himself to his feet, sore but functional. With a dozen anomalies on each floor, his strike and hide methods would only take him so far before it turned into a shooting gallery. He was going to have to push himself to the limits to succeed.

He started by deactivating the emergency stop on the elevator and pressing the button for the floor below, then ducking out before the doors closed. He rushed down the stairs, stopping outside the door in the stairwell and pulling out the minigun again.

He quietly made his way through the door into a large cubicle pen where the anomalies were all pointing guns at the elevator that had just opened up. Jason unloaded on the room, smashing apart cubicles and gunning down anomalies. Catching them by surprise, only a few got off wild shots before they were cut apart by the energy discharges from the gun.

The minigun fell silent as the unstable genesis core was drained and Jason put the gun away. On his tactical map in the corner of his vision, he watched as the anomalies below swarmed towards the stairwell. He pulled out the sci-fi bazooka and another core, loading it into the top. Moving to the other side of the room, avoiding broken cubicle walls and massacred astronauts, he turned around and fired the weapon at the wall where the stairwell passed behind it.

The stairwell had two dozen anomalies storming up it, but they were destroyed as a good chunk of that side of the building was eradicated. Jason was blasted through the wall by the backwash of the blast, blacking out.

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In the cloud yacht in Venice, Jason's family continued to watch coverage of the Slovakian transformation zone.

"...no idea where the tentacle monster on top of the dome came from but the gathered forces continue to fight it even as it continues to grow..."

\*\*\*

Jason came to half-buried in debris in the middle of the street. Dried blood flaked off his eyes as he forced them open and his head swam, the world seeming to spin around him. He tried pushing a broken lump of plaster-covered brick off himself but a stabbing pain in his arm made him stop. He was pointedly aware that without Colin healing him, even while sealed away, he may not have woken up at all.

He shifted about enough to make sure nothing was stabbing into his body anywhere too serious and allowed himself time to heal until he could extricate himself. No anomalies showed up and would have likely have killed him already if any were going to. Finally, he dragged himself out of the debris and stripped off what remained of his clothes and sat all his weapons on the ground. The bloody, ragged remains of his outfit told the story of just how injured Jason had been, pushing even his silver-rank endurance to the limit. He left only his boxer shorts that had suffered remarkably little, the white with red love hearts pattern only a little bloodstained, despite the rest of him being largely coated red.

Suddenly thinking of something he hadn't done in a long time, Jason pulled a recording crystal from his inventory and tossed it into the air. Despite it being so long, the old habit felt comfortably familiar.

"I haven't done this in a while, the magic being kind of crap in my world so the recording crystals don't work so well," he said to the crystal. "I'll catch you all up at some point but I'm kind of in the middle of something right now. I guess I can hit the highlights. Farrah's alive; that's a winner. So am I, for that matter, which may be more surprising. I die

kind of a lot. Is three times a lot? I mean, three isn't a big number, but not many people hit the triple when it comes to carking it. I think three counts as a lot.”

He controlled the crystal with a gesture to pan around.

“I'm saving the world, so I'd best get back to it. As you can see, I'm standing in my underwear in the middle of the street, covered in blood, next to a building I just blew up. The street is in an extradimensional city I'm taking over so a hole doesn't get blasted in the side of the universe. Mondays, am I right? Oh, wait, you have a six-day week. Still, it's a day of the week, it's not that hard to pick up from context.”

Jason moved the crystal to focus back on him and waggled a disapproving finger at it.

“Clive, I know you've got questions but stop interrupting. People are trying to listen to the recording. Be courteous and wait.”

Jason pulled out a flask of cleaning solution and poured it over himself. It was something he made himself, from his skill book-derived alchemy abilities. It was a poor substitute for crystal wash but Jason had to put something in his cloud house after the crystal wash ran out. It stung as it reached his various wounds, Jason wincing like an eighties action hero when the love interest treats his wounds.

“Jory, if you're watching this, I want you to know I have a new appreciation for the quality of your crystal wash. I am going to need quite a lot of it once I get back, by the way. Like, a lot. I don't want to go running out again, so waaay more than last time.”

Jason tipped another flask of the cleaning solution over his weapons before putting them away.

“Anyway, none of my essence abilities work here, which sucks. I spent the last few hours fighting it out with a small army of astronauts with ray guns, which was pretty awesome. I'll explain what they are later.”

He took a look at the building he had been blasted out of. On the side where Jason woke up, it was utterly devastated. When he circumnavigated the building, he discovered that the other side was completely gone.

“Maybe I don't need a bigger bazooka. It's going to be hard finding something to loot.”

Remembering the department store and its menswear section, he turned and trudged in its direction.

“Now, getting some magic weapons was useful and all, but now for the real boost in power. It's time for a pants upgrade.”

## Chapter 418

### It's Still Not About Killing Monsters

The Bertinelli Collection in the menswear department of the department store Jason found had a very specific set of clothes. Modelled after the clothes designed for Jason by Gilbert Bertinelli in the other world, they fit like a glove. Unlike the originals, these were silver-rank, although none boasted any exceptional abilities. They were clothes, with some minor self-cleaning and self-repair functions, but mostly designed for casual wear. Gilbert's designs and material choices made them more durable than most but they were hardly adventuring gear. Many of Jason's original outfits had fallen to misadventure, in no small part because he and the threats he had faced had both come to outrank them.

The silver-rank replacements felt perfect sliding on, Jason hoped they wouldn't dissolve the moment he left the transformation space. Erika wouldn't like it if Jason showed up naked on the news. He also looked around at the goods that weren't just ranked-up reproductions of his old clothes.

Gilbert's Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman was a store that catered to the adventurer with armour that would put them in good stead, all the way until they ranked up. One of the first things Gary had warned Jason against was cheaping-out on equipment since it would cost more in the long term than investing in good gear from the start. The menswear department didn't have any of the heavy armour, but there was some of the lightweight cloth armour that Jason preferred and was a particular specialty of Gilbert's.

Jason looked around at outfits he had seen in Gilbert's store but never purchased, along with some that he had. There was a copy of his old trap weaver armour, which had served him excellently at iron-rank. It had stronger self-repair enchantments than the clothes, along with a plethora of additional features. There was even a replica of his bespoke bronze-rank armour that had been destroyed in Makassar. He wasn't going to wear them, since they were at their original rank, but he took both if only for sentimental reasons.

Jason loaded up his inventory's outfit tabs with new clothes and then looked over some of the silver-rank armour options, although the pickings were slim, being a menswear section rather than an actual armoury. There wasn't anything as fancy as his custom armour, but he picked up an outfit of black and dark green material. It highlighted Gilbert's expertise in getting as much protection as possible without compromising flexibility.

The outfit was a ranked up version of an inexpensive armour Jason had considered at iron-rank, before being convinced to splurge by Gary. It may have lacked features but even Gilbert's basic products didn't skimp on quality. Jason took off the fresh clothes he had slipped on and suited up in the armour.

"It's still not about killing monsters," he told his reflection in a wall mirror. "It's about how good you look while killing monsters."

\*\*\*

The next expansion of Jason's territory went smoothly, being a repeat of the rabid horde anomalies he had faced with the gold rankers. The minigun proved to be highly effective, mowing down anomalies like blades of grass. Using the gun to completely deplete the unstable cores converted them into something else.

---

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 [Regenesis Core].

---

Jason had no idea what a regenesis core was, but it seemed the reclamation cores could potentially drain the power from gold-rankers and ancient vampires, which represented a huge weapon against them. Jason resolved to use the minigun to create as many of them as he could.

With his increased arsenal and a lot of territory left to claim, Jason conducted his next domain expansion with a large excess of the required stable genesis cores. Each expansion had increased the affected area, but adding all those extra cores caused the expansion to blow out to an area five or six kilometres across.

The domain finally reached the limits of the city zone, which Jason estimated to be roughly the area covered by the dome in the real world. With so much expansion, Jason wouldn't be able to see what lay in the gloom beyond his new territory until he ventured out to the new border, but he had more important things to deal with. He sensed anomalies penetrating his domain from all around it and could immediately tell they were not like those that came before.

Given the distances involved, Jason commandeered one of the cars out on the street. He could have used his silver-rank speed to sprint around but the cars were just there, so he decided to use them. They were rather science-fiction looking cars, which he didn't

hate, but he had no keys. Seeing as it was part of his domain, he concentrated on controlling it and the door clicked open. It took longer to get the car to start but after a minute of prodding with his aura, the electric engine hummed to life.

The ride wasn't as smooth as Shade's car forms but it was still an easy journey out through the streets of Jason's expanded domain. He stopped the quiet car a few hundred metres short of where he sensed the closest anomaly and progressed on foot. Compared to the human-shaped anomalies of the last few expansions, Jason could already tell these were different.

Their auras were notably more powerful and there were far fewer of them, although fewer was relative. Jason's spirit domain was now somewhere between five and six kilometres across and he sensed anomalies cross the border at fairly even distances, all around. He estimated the number of anomalies somewhere north of a hundred and fifty.

Jason's first objective was to scout out the enemy, catch one before they started converging and test its strength. He moved carefully, observing its aura. It was moving swiftly, although not at the breakneck rush the rabid anomalies had. He was in a more suburban area of the city without so many tall buildings, one and two-storey homes with one-floor businesses peppered amongst them. He found one three-storey apartment complex and went inside, using the roof as a vantage.

What he spotted walking down the middle of the street looked like a werewolf, a hulking hybrid of man and beast that stood larger than either. It was bipedal, with long arms ending in brutal-looking claws. It would have stood some eight or nine feet tall if it hadn't been hunched forward.

Jason was about to move when the anomaly sniffed the air and looked right up at him.

"Crap."

He pulled the pistols in his hip and shoulder holster, immediately firing at the werewolf. He wasn't anticipating much but wanted to compare them to previous anomalies. It was already moving fast before the first shots went off, sprinting at the building. Its shambling gait wasn't wildly fast, but when it leapt at the wall and started climbing, its pace barely slowed. Strong claws digging right into the wall, the creature rushed up as Jason leaned over the side to rain down pistol blasts.

The pistols singed hair but didn't seem to impede the creature at all, which vaulted onto the flat roof as Jason scrambled back, dropping his pistols. He smoothly pulled the lightning gun from the magnetic clips on his back and fired.

Electricity blasted out of the arc rifle in a blinding flash, locking onto the werewolf anomaly like a tether. The creature was rocked back on its feet by the jolt of electricity but let out an angry growl as it pushed forward again. The air was filled with the stench of burning hair as the anomaly tried to push on with the electricity burning up its flesh, only to collapse on the rooftop.

The muscle paralysis effect of the lightning gun had kicked in, leaving the werewolf struggling to swipe its claws vainly in Jason's direction, even as its arms savagely cramped up. Jason continued holding down the trigger to pump electricity into it.

---

➤ [You have defeated \[Living Anomaly\].](#)

---

Jason slung the lightning gun on his back and picked up his dropped pistols before holstering them. The lightning gun had proved to be effective against the werewolf but it burned through far too much of Jason's mana for just one monster. He could potentially bank on the chaining effect to take on multiples at once, but the chains weren't reliable and there were still more than a hundred and fifty of the anomalies. He had some mana potions but nowhere near enough to fuel the lightning gun enough for that.

The solution would have to be the minigun, which was an acceptable outcome. It ran on cores rather than Jason's mana and he wanted to deplete some of those cores anyway, so he set out to hunt the monstrous anomalies with his giant gun.

The anomalies turned out to be all human-animal hybrids, mostly wolves and bears that fell quite easily to the minigun. Other proved much trickier, such as flying falcon hybrids that dodged the blasts of his unwieldy gun. Against them, Jason was forced to pull the lightning gun back out and burn through huge chunks of his mana.

This was a trend as Jason's powerful minigun made short work of the larger hybrids. More troublesome were the smaller, faster ones that were hard to pin down with the unwieldy weapon. The worst were the fox hybrids, who were only the size of children but still boasted strength at the low end of silver-rank. Their speed was closer to the high end, making them agile enough to avoid the heavy minigun.

Jason's response was to drop the gun and pull out his sword. The fox hybrids were fast but lacked the strength of the bear hybrids and the savage claws and teeth of the werewolves. This meant that Jason's armour held up relatively well to the fox hybrids but they were still strong and fast enough that many drew blood before Jason cut them down.

Eventually, Jason took all the anomalies down. Things got hairy at the end as they started converging and attacking in groups, but the minigun was a specialty tool for

handling clustered enemies. Only against a mixed group of five, including some devilishly elusive fox hybrids was Jason ever worried about the outcome.

When the last anomaly fell, nothing happened. Jason had roamed close enough to the edges of the city to see that his domain now encompassed all of it, with a gloom-filled forest beyond. He had been sure that this would complete his second full territory but he had no response from the system. This meant that either the territory expanded beyond the limits of the city or there were still anomalies remaining.

Just as he was considering the possibility of some stealth hybrid that had evaded his aura senses, something new came lumbering out of the gloom. Jason heard it first, a rumble of distant thunder, then another and another. Jason had seen enough monster movies to know giant footsteps when he heard them.

The aura came next, pushing into Jason's domain as if struggling to escape the gloom. It was like Jason's aura in that, despite being silver-rank, it possessed strength far above the norm. Even Jason's aura, for all its power, fell short of the sheer magnitude of what was emerging from the darkness beyond Jason's domain. A giant leg appeared first, taller than a house and darker than night. It looked to be made from the same void-stuff as Jason's cloak, but without stars to light up the black emptiness.

As it stepped out of the gloom, The creature's full, looming height was revealed to be the equal of Jason's towering pagoda. It was more than a kilometre away from Jason but he had no trouble spotting it, despite being a dark figure against a dark background. The size was a huge factor, but also it was limned in a silvery light that only highlighted how much of a void its body was. It made the entity look like a gateway to some dark dimension.

The shadow giant had the proportions of a tall, thin man, with long arms that hung down at its knees, dangling limply as it walked. It moved with a slow inexorability, turning in Jason's direction. While it looked slow, that was an illusion of size, with the vast length of its stride actually propelling it quite swiftly.

Jason moved himself to a place where he had a long line of sight on the monster, picking the grassy strip between where the city ended and the dark woods began. He pulled out the magic bazooka, having positioned himself hundreds of metres away. He had no interest in catching himself in the explosion again.

He dropped in an unstable core and fired it with the lumbering giant not even trying to dodge. It was struck dead centre, its torso and head immediately wiped out in a blast that still had enough force to whip violently at Jason's hair and clothes, even from so far away. Gobbets of something black, wet and stinking rained down from the sky, the core

explosion almost having evaporated the giant. Only its legs and its severed hands remained, all dropping to the ground. The legs toppled like felled trees, one of them crushing a house.

“That was surprisingly straightforward,” Jason said to himself.

- 
- You have defeated [Greater Anomaly].
  - You have overtaken a genesis space territory and purged all anomalous elements.
  - Completed territory is being remade.
  - Return to core territory to initiate transfiguration of new territory.
- 

Jason’s first territory had undergone a wild transformation after completely claiming it, going from dingy hotel to opulent pagoda. It sounded like his second territory would undergo a similar change and he had no interest in being in the middle of a city folding in on itself like origami or whatever ended up happening. First, though, he had to loot the giant.

“Boss monster,” he said as he wandered towards the closest toppled leg. “This is definitely a dungeon.”

He frowned as a thought occurred to him.

“It better not drop loot boxes full of crap cosmetics.”

## Chapter 419

### Open to the Unanticipated

Jason examined the loot from the Shadow Giant as it dissolved into rainbow smoke behind him. It was a dark sphere, just large enough to fit in one hand. It was cool and glassy to the touch.

---

Item: [Dark Orb] (unranked, uncommon)

*Contains the power to unseal the power of darkness. (consumable, awakening stone).*

- Requirements: Sealed [Dark Essence] ability.
- Effect: Unseals a random [Dark Essence] ability.
- You have 5 sealed dark essence abilities.
- Would you like to use [Dark Orb] Y/N?

---

“Yes.”

- 
- Ability [Shadow of the Reaper] has been unsealed.
- 

The orb melted into Jason’s hand in a sensation reminiscent of when he had absorbed awakening stones in the early days of his magical life. As the orb was fully absorbed, Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“Mr Asano.”

“Shade!”

Jason enfolded his familiar in a hug.

“Ooh, you’re quite squishy. It’s nice.”

“This is rather awkward.”

“It’s great to have a friend here, Shade. I’ve been talking to myself a lot and what company I have had has been far from ideal.”

“We have been observing. Colin and Gordon are eager to help and unsealing either would have been more effective than me. While it is good to be liberated, you would be better served by a more combat-oriented companion.”

“Don’t underestimate the value of having someone to talk to. You know I don’t always make the best choices when left alone.”

“Quite.”

"You could have argued a little. Still, maybe the others will be next. There'll be more boss monsters that drop these orbs, right?"

"It seems likely," Shade said. "We can reliably assert that the anomalies attacking your spirit domain are, at least in part, a direct reaction to your presence here."

"Do you think it's some kind of test left behind by the original Builder? Or part of some safety mechanism in case something went wrong with his experiment."

"I would not have the temerity to speak to the mind of a great astral being, particularly one who diverged from its intrinsic purpose. Some idiosyncrasies are to be expected from the new Builder, with its mortal origins, but for the original great astral beings, their purpose is their nature. What would divert them from that is beyond my understanding."

"Maybe he got dumped."

"That seems unlikely."

\*\*\*

Jason and Shade stood on the top floor balcony and looked out over the city.

---

➤ **Initiate transfiguration of new territory Y/N?**

---

The transformation of Jason's second territory was very different from his first. In the dark sky, the constellations set out like magic circles started to shift. Moving to form a grand circle centred above the pagoda. Then, in the middle of the vast circle of stars, a tiny but blindingly bright light sparked into being before flaring out to take the form of a sun, shining in the dark and bringing daylight to the domain for the first time. A cerulean sky started expanding out to displace the dark of night.

A column of glorious sunlight beamed down on the pagoda, then slowly expanded out to touch every part of the city, Wherever it reached, gold, silver and blue mist came steam up, as if the light were burning away its impurities, obscuring Jason's view.

As the mist cleared, it revealed the transformed city. Previously, when he had claimed it for his domain, it had taken on the colours of Jason's cloud house. Now, as he completed the process of incorporating it into his spirit domain, it wasn't just the colours but the very materials of the cloud house that could be seen spreading out before him. The streets were dark crystal and the footpaths were light stone tiles, but the buildings were all constructed from clouds, like some make-believe kingdom. Gardens and greenery were more prevalent than ever, from planters lining the streets to traffic islands lined with trees and roundabouts containing flowering gardens.

In the sky above, the sunlight-filled blue sky extended as far as the great circle of stars, at which point the previous void of night continued to surround it. Only Jason's domain stood in the light, while the night's gloom continued to hold sway in the regions around it.

Jason and Shade observed the city made of cloud-stuff.

"It can't stay this way if I manage to solve this thing and the transformation zone's dome comes down, can it?" Jason asked.

"We are meddling with the building blocks of reality," Shade said. "Anything is possible."

"It seems odd, though. What I'm trying to do boils down to resolving the incongruity between the world's reality and the astral space reality after the transformation zone mashed them together. How is a magical fairy town not wildly incongruous? It looks like a children's book, or a mobile app hiding its predatory business model behind adorable graphic design."

"Perhaps this is the middle ground," Shade suggested. "You are creating a bridge between the mundane and the magical. Like any bridge, it must cross between them and be anchored on both sides."

"I guess we'll find out, sooner or later."

- 
- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
  - Territory has been renamed [Soul Haven].
  
  - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 38.6%.
  
  - Evolution of ability [Spirit Vault] is tied to the transformation zone. If the transformation zone is stabilised before the ability completes its evolution, the evolution will fail.
  
  - Anomalies attacking as a result of further spirit domain expansion will have increased power.
  
  - You have claimed sufficient territory to stabilise the transformation zone and separate it from the convergent astral space.
  
  - Separating the space with the current territory will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the surrounding reality. Claim additional territory to reduce the severity of this effect.
  
  - Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?
-

Jason had ostensibly achieved his objective and discussed with Shade the ramifications of stabilising the transformation zone. They immediately agreed that Jason should push on, reducing the impact of doing so as much as possible. The dimensional stability of the world was at the breaking point, so they needed to minimise the damage as much as they could. Jason could live without the ability evolution, but with how much the degree of evolution had jumped with his second territory, he likely wouldn't have to.

Soon Jason was driving through the transformed streets in one of Shade's car forms. The road surfaces were still dark crystal, now in flagstone-style bricks. The cars were gone from the streets and most of the storefronts were now empty. On spotting one that wasn't, Jason excitedly called for Shade to stop, leaping out while the car was still in motion. Jason dashed up to the door, holding himself back from smashing through the glass as he waited the second it took for the door to slide open. He rushed inside and madly searched, only to let out a cry of anguish as he found a small shelf label.

"Mr Asano," Shade said his voice uncharacteristically soft as he emerged from Jason's shadow. "Sometimes in life, we all suffer setbacks. It is how we respond to them that helps us grow."

Jason yanked the label from the shelf and threw it bitterly to the ground before storming out, leaving Shade behind.

"Of course," Shade said to the empty room, "some of us have more growing to do than others."

He picked up the label and returned it to its place.

CRYSTAL WASH OUT OF STOCK – THANK YOU FOR VISITING JORY'S FRIENDLY LOCAL PHARMACY.

\*\*\*

Most of Shade's utility came from facilitating other powers of Jason's, with his only direct attack being a mana drain. With the rest of Jason's abilities still sealed, what Shade could do was serve as a distraction and help Jason with stealth, masking his heat and scent. These both proved useful when Jason expanded his domain into the thick woodlands surrounding the city.

The responding anomalies were more hybrids, stronger than those that had come before. With the tight confines and poor sightlines of the forest, the huge and heavy minigun was more hindrance than help, forcing Jason to turn to his sword. With Shade distracting the hybrids and confounding their senses, Jason was able to stage ambushes and manage their greater strength, expanding his domain twice more to claim the entire forest territory.

The boss monster this time was not something he could just blast away with the core launcher. It was a single hybrid, no larger than the others, but with the speed of a fox hybrid and the strength of a bear hybrid. Jason fought it amongst the trees, a contest of agility, speed and skill that left him a bloody wreck by the time the creature fell.

- 
- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
  - Territory has been renamed [Tranquil Shadow Woods].
  
  - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 84.7%.
  
  - Evolution of ability [Spirit Vault] is tied to the transformation zone. If the transformation zone is stabilised before the ability completes its evolution, the evolution will fail.
  
  - Anomalies attacking as a result of further spirit domain expansion will have increased power.
  
  - You have claimed sufficient territory to stabilise the transformation zone and separate it from the convergent astral space.
  
  - Separating the space with the current territory will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the surrounding reality. Claim additional territory to reduce the severity of this effect. Current severity reduction: 13.7%
  
  - Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?
- 

Jason looted another power-unlocking orb from the boss, this time a sin orb. It served as further confirmation that the transformation space was reacting specifically to him. He got lucky with the unlocked power, which was one of his special attacks, Punish.

Punish was one of the few powers Jason had that could synergise with itself by inflicting necrotic damage while also applying the stacking sin affliction, which increased all subsequent necrotic damage. It was an ability representative of Jason's earliest days as an adventurer when his power set was built around low but exponentially growing damage.

\*\*\*

The gloom-filled forest was replaced by woodlands where sunlight dappled through the canopy to create a magical twilight. Jason sat slumped up against a tree.

"You should rest," Shade told him.

"I am resting."

"Proper rest. Return to the pagoda and sleep."

"We have no idea when this whole place will collapse in on itself. We may not have that kind of time."

"This amalgamation of a transformation zone and a proto-space has already been in place longer than any previously recorded instance of either. It is showing no signs of instability. You have been awake for around sixty hours, discounting the time you spent unconscious, which was hardly restful slumber. Even essence users need sleep."

"I'm barely an essence user, right now."

"Mr Asano, you have already accomplished your basic goal. If you strive for more without rest you may fail and lose everything. If you rest and the zone shows signs of breaking down, I will wake you and you can stabilise the zone."

Jason opened his mouth to respond but all that came out was a yawn.

"Fine," he conceded, pushing himself to his feet. He condensed the mist from his cloud flask to form a floating bed and fell into it.

"Yeah," he said happily. "That's the stuff."

"Why were you on the ground, leaning against a tree, instead of using that already?" Shade asked.

"Because I'd fall asleep. This is super comfy."

\*\*\*

Jason's domain expanded once more. As with previous territories, it transitioned unnaturally into a new biome at the territory's edge. In this case, the transition was to green, rolling hills washed by a chill wind. It was pastoral land, with patchwork fields, scattered barns and farmhouses visible in the distance. Jason's senses were alert for the appearance of the anomalies, but what he sensed first gravely startled him.

"Shade!"

Shade transformed into a black horse with a white mane and leapt into a sprint the moment Jason leapt atop him. Turf flew up under his hooves as he quickly reached speeds a racing bike would have trouble matching.

"I didn't think this would happen," Jason yelled over the rush of air. "I figured if I was going to find them, it would have happened by now. We've expanded way beyond the original area of the transformation zone."

"I believe that, in this place, we must always be open to the unanticipated," Shade said.

"I fought a bunch of spacemen with ray guns, so you won't get any argument from me."

Jason felt the first anomalies cross the border into his domain as he arrived at a farmhouse, leapt off his horse and threw open the door. Rushing through the building to the auras he sensed, he found a group of people standing around, looking at each other in

confusion. Each had pale skin and brassy, metallic hair matched perfectly by the colour of their eyes, marking them as not humans but celestines. They all turned as Jason burst in.

“Come with me if you want to live.”

## Chapter 420

### I'm Going to Bet on Myself

After a moment of stunned surprise, the family of celestines erupted in questions, from where they were to what had happened to them. Jason delicately used aura suppression to calm them down and fix their attention on him.

"I know you all have questions," he told them. "I have answers but first we need to go. There are dangers here and I need to take you somewhere safe."

The family was made up of an older couple, two young women, three young men and a pair of children. One of the young women narrowed her eyes at Jason.

"You're Jason Asano," she said. "I've seen you on television."

"Yep. Lovely to meet you. You may have noticed from TV that when I show up it's because bad stuff is either about to happen or is already happening. We seriously need to go."

"Where's your magic cloak?"

"That's a longer story than we have time for right this second. Can you get this lot moving?"

The woman seemed to be handling the situation better than her shell shocked family, so Jason deputised her as wrangler for the rest and had her lead them all outside. Shade was waiting in a helicopter form reminiscent of the one Kaito had used, but in more of a black and white, Airwolf colour scheme. It was a large design with enough room for everyone in the spacious passenger compartment.

After shepherding the family aboard, Jason climbed into the back with them and the helicopter took off. One of the kids pointed out the window at something, drawing everyone's attention.

"There are people there! We need to help them," the child said.

"They aren't people," Jason said, who had long been tracking them with his aura senses. "Look again."

Closer inspection of the creatures approaching the farmhouse revealed that only distance gave them the illusion of humanity. They were oddly-proportioned and way too large, like fantasy dwarves except three metres tall.

"What are those things?" the young woman who had helped Jason asked.

"Monsters?"

"Basically," Jason said. "It's a little more nuanced than that, but for practical purposes, yes. I'm Jason, as you know. May I ask your name?"

“Nikoleta.”

“Okay, Nikoleta, I know you have a lot of questions.”

“Yes. Where are we? How did we get here? What happened to our hair and eyes?”

“Yeah,” Jason said with a sympathetic wince. “Okay, you’ve seen the transformation zones on the television right? The big domes that change places and the people caught in them?”

“We were in one of those domes?”

“You still are,” Jason said.

Nikoleta looked out the window at the sky.

“I don’t see any dome. I didn’t think anyone woke up inside them, either.”

“This one is a bit different than normal,” Jason said. “That’s why I came inside to deal with it.”

“I didn’t think anyone go into the domes.”

“Then how?” Nikoleta asked.

Jason flashed her a grin.

“I’m not just anyone.”

She narrowed her eyes at him again.

“You’re quite full of yourself, aren’t you?”

Jason let out a laugh.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, I am.”

\*\*\*

The transformation zone had turned the family from humans to celestines, whose astral affinity inured them to many of the dimensional space’s deleterious effects. Many was not all, however, and they started to feel ill. Once Shade flew far enough to get them within the boundary of Jason’s claimed and much more dimensionally stable territory they immediately started to recover.

They might not have been human anymore, but that very fact saved them. The connection they possessed to the astral as celestines protected them better than the shields the gold-rankers had used. As for the oppressive aura, Jason controlled that within his completed territory and could easily shield the family from it.

Jason moved into the cockpit of the helicopter, sealing himself off from the family.

“Should we take them to the portal and let them out?” Jason asked. “It feels like that would be sending them into the lion’s den.”

“They are likely to be seized upon by the people outside,” Shade agreed. “They are likely to be taken away and studied.”

"Let's just leave them at a house, then," Jason said. "We'll keep them here until we leave so there's a chance to protect them."

The helicopter set down in the residential area of the city and the family disembarked, looking around at the strange cloud houses. They were startled when the helicopter dissolved into Jason's shadow.

Jason took them into one of the houses. They reached out to touch the strange cloud-stuff it was made of, the adults wary but the children delighted. Jason hadn't explored one of the houses before but it was very much akin to the cloud houses created by his flask. After they got used to their odd surroundings and settled into some cloud furniture, Jason took the time to explain their situation as best he could.

While he did that, Jason had Shade scouring the spirit domain for food, hoping for a grocer or supermarket amongst the largely empty buildings. What he found was a large cluster of fruit trees in the forest territory and returned shortly afterwards, bringing back a large supply of pears, plums and peaches.

"It's all fruit starting with the letter P," Jason commented as Shade delivered the food. "Was it alphabetised? Is there a bunch of other fruit groves for the other letters?"

"This may not be the time, Mr Asano."

"Right, yes."

The family displayed a variety of responses to Shade. The older couple seemed to view him as some kind of demon and their circumstances in general as unnatural. The children were fascinated by their surroundings and the changes to themselves. Jason had a history of muddling explanations, so he was as plain and straightforward as he could be, which he admitted to himself wasn't very. He found it best to explain everything to Nikoleta after taking her aside as she was good at asking the right questions. He then left the rest of the family to her.

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Jason gave the best explanation he could in the little time he had, given that every moment he spent out of the newly expanded region of his spirit domain it was shrinking away. The family would be safe inside a completed territory but Jason needed to go. Flying back toward the conflicted domain space in Shade's helicopter form, Jason voiced a concern he had.

"Do you think there are more people out there?" Jason asked. "We're lucky that this area was just some farmland with bugger all people."

Jason had asked about the family about neighbours and they said there were likely to be more survivors, depending on how big the dome was and exactly where it was positioned.

“There’s no telling what will happen to anyone still in unclaimed territory when all this extra size from the proto-space goes away. You can’t fit fifty kilometres of landscape inside five kilometres of space. Am I going to be killing people?”

“Mr Asano, while rescuing people is an admirable goal, you cannot know for sure how many of them are somewhere out in the unclaimed areas of the transformation zone. Only by completely taking over this zone could you do that and the attempt would be irresponsible.”

“I know,” Jason agreed.

"Your priority must continue to be stabilising the dimensional boundary."

“I know.”

“Even at the cost of condemning some people to be annihilated.”

“I know.”

“With every territory the anomalies grow stronger, increasing the risk of outright failure.”

“Bloody hell, Shade, I know!”

“Knowing the right choice is not the same as making it, Mr Asano. You may no longer be human, yet your human nature remains.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It has good and bad points. Humans are poor at objectively assessing their circumstances. They can be irrational in ways that are destructive to themselves and the people around them. You know this.”

“Yeah. And thanks, Shade. For keeping me on the right track.”

“I am not infallible, Mr Asano.”

“No one is, Shade. Whatever the gods may think.”

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The new territory’s anomalies turned out to be trolls. Powerful but huge and lumbering, they were the perfect chance for Jason to deplete more unstable cores with the minigun. He quickly fought through multiple domains to capture the next territory but was faced with a problem. Both the core-launching bazooka and the minigun were showing signs of physical stress. Jason had been using them extensively and they were now showing signs of breaking down.

As he flew back to the house where the family was staying, he examined them both. The metal was starting to warp and the minigun would occasionally make new and unwelcome sounds while being fired. Of his other weapons, only his sword and the lightning gun were still proving effective against his increasingly powerful opponents, but each had its own issues.

The lightning gun showed no signs of wear and tear, not needing to channel the immense power of unstable genesis cores that was wearing out the larger weapons. The mana consumption to kill rate simply wasn't enough to wipe out enough anomalies, though. As for the sword, it was reaching the limits of what enemies it could truly harm. If not for the special attack he unlocked, it might not have been worth using anymore.

"I have no idea how to repair the heavy weapons," Jason said, "and I haven't looted anything that could replace them."

As the anomalies grew fewer in number but individually stronger, the loot they dropped had changed from weapons and potions to awakening stones and essences, many of which were rare and valuable. The trolls had dropped might and blood essences, but much more valuably, renewal essences. Renewal essences were of the second-highest rarity but were considered as valuable as most legendary essences due to being the premier essence for healers. Jason had picked up four of them in the course of wiping out a territory's worth of trolls.

The specific essences largely depended on the enemies, which was the norm, even if the drop rate was accelerated. The animal hybrids had dropped animal essences, along with essences like hunt, claw, might and swift. Jason had also managed to pick up three of the highly sought-after wing essences from them. Wing was an essence used in very desirable combinations, such as the dragon confluence that his friend Humphrey had and the phoenix confluence of Humphrey's sister. Their mother, Danielle, had acquired wing essences for her children at considerable cost.

As for herself, Danielle had an even more valuable essence. Dimension was arguably the single most desirable of the legendary essences, and Jason had managed to loot four of them. They didn't seem tied to specific enemies but were simply more prevalent in the unstable transformation zone.

They did little good for Jason in his immediate circumstances, though. They would make him wealthy after returning to the other world where their true value was understood, but what he needed at the moment was replacement weapons.

"It may be time to give up on these weapons, Mr Asano," Shade suggested. "If the weapons break down while in use, they may fail explosively, given the forces they channel."

"I don't think I can take another territory without them."

"Then perhaps it is time to accept that you have done enough. Your ability has completed its evolution."

The boss monster was another that fell to the core launcher but it was showing some dangerous warping. After claiming his new territory, Jason had followed Humphrey in gaining a second evolution of the same ability, although this was not something Jason knew, having shortly afterwards been torn from his friends. As with Humphrey, it was something Jason had been told wasn't possible. As for the nature of the ability, Jason was unsure what to make of it.

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#### Ability: [Spirit Domain]

- This ability is evolved from the ability [Spirit Vault]. This is a secondary gift evolution.
- You have a dimensional storage space.
- You may call up a gate and physically enter your dimensional storage space. Only those you allow may enter; others cannot forcibly intrude. You may directly portal from within the storage space to another area using the location of the gate as a starting point, even if the gate is obstructed or destroyed, preventing ordinary egress.
- You may summon familiars within the storage space without the use of a ritual, although any material requirements of the ritual must still be consumed.
- You may create spirit domains that reflect your nature and power. The maximum total size of your spirit domains created through this ability is a factor of your rank and soul strength. You may not convert existing spirit domains into your own.
- Your current spirit domain exceeds your maximum total domain size available through this ability by 963,241%. Increase your rank to increase available domain size.

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The ability was again not something that helped Jason immediately. He wasn't sure exactly how useful a spirit domain was outside if trying to patch a hole in the side of reality. It seemed unlikely that Jason would maintain his current domain size once the transformation zone was stabilised since it eclipsed the space of the dome covering it by a vast margin. It also exceeded the limits of his ability by a factor of almost ten thousand.

It was another thing that he put aside as a concern for later. His immediate focus had to be what to do next, be it stabilise the zone immediately or push for more territory. Jason agreed with Shade's points about the risks of pushing on but held two major reservations about stopping. One was the concern of finding more people, but Shade was right in that he couldn't let them take priority over the world at large.

The greater consideration was how much damage would be done to the dimensional membrane of the world when Jason merged the transformation zone back into normal reality.

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- **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: 41.8%**
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The counterpoint to these concerns was whether another territory was even possible. With his best weapons on the verge of collapse and even stronger enemies in the offing, each option had its own potential for disaster.

"I'm going to bet on myself," Jason decided. "One more territory."

"While it may be a risk," Shade said, "letting things stand as they are could well be the greater one."

"That was my thinking as well," Jason said. "I was originally hoping to unseal more powers and clean-sweep this place but I think I'm coming up on the limit. One last push before we bring this thing to a close. I just hope it's enough."