

Chapter 391

Finish the Job

No one paid attention to one more man in a dark suit and dark glasses. There was no shortage of them as the funeral was conducted under a bright, clear sky, despite the winter. Jason's use of aura control had progressed to the point that even in a crowd with many essence users he could manipulate their perception to go unnoticed, even standing right amongst them.

It helped that all the essence users were lower rank than Jason. The network leadership would never allow precious silver-rankers to take time away when there could be a transformation zone to fight over at any moment. The Network members were mostly from the ranks, crowding the grassy, outdoor venue for Kaito's service. In the months he had been one of them, Kaito had flown them into hot zones, evacuated them when injured and delivered critical supplies in the midst of danger.

Jason watched Amy, standing stony-faced at the front. Someone had given her an aura suppression bracelet so her emotions weren't on open display in front of all the essence users present.

Publicly, Jason was a wanted criminal, internationally. A rogue element, responsible for bombings in Japan and killing Global Defense Network personnel in Austria. The Network leadership knew that with the failed capture attempt and the death of Jason's brother, lover and friend, they had declared war. Accordingly, they sought to sever Jason's influence and connections inside the Network.

Ostensibly, this meant that the Network was on the lookout for Jason at events like his brother's funeral. In reality, they knew that even a gold-ranker had failed to pin him down, with no shortage of people having died in the attempt. Most Network members didn't even agree with what the Americans had done, especially those from the Australian branches that had worked alongside Jason and his brother. The last thing the people looking for Jason wanted was to find him.

After the service, many people came up to Amy, offering their condolences. Her eyes went wide when she found Jason standing in front of her. She glanced at the people around them.

"How are you here?" she asked in a conspiratorial whisper. "Why aren't people jumping all over you?"

"A trick of perception. So long as no one draws too much attention to me, they won't notice that it's me."

“So I could yell out and people would try and grab you?”

“Yes.”

“Why shouldn’t I, then? You were meant to bring the father of my children back home.”

“I know,” Jason said, his voice cracking.

She scowled as they continued to converse in hushed tones.

“What are you going to do about the people that killed him?” she asked.

“The man in question is powerful. Far more than me but his time will come. First, I have to finish the job that Kaito and I started.”

“Is it worth it?” she asked.

Jason nodded.

“Things are going to get worse before they get better,” he said, “but Kaito played his part in getting us all past this. I know it isn’t a comfort, but he died for something that truly matters. To give his children a future.”

“I know it was his choice to go,” she said. “Even so, I can’t help but hate you for taking him.”

Jason nodded but said nothing else. If his words couldn’t make things better, he kept his mouth shut.

Michael Aram discreetly approached Annabeth Tilden after the service, as she was walking back to the car with her wife. He was in charge of security and media management for the event.

“Committeewoman,” he greeted her, with a respectful nod.

“What is it, Aram? Shouldn’t you be answering to Ketevan?”

“She asked me to keep you in the loop. Some of our security personnel have glimpsed a blurred artefact on the camera feeds.”

“He’s here, then,” Anna said. “What did Keti tell you to do?”

“Pretend he isn’t.”

“Good. If he didn’t want us to know, we wouldn’t.”

“Is he provoking us?”

“Not at his brother’s funeral. He’s probably going to pay me one of his unexpected visits. Thank you, Aram.”

Aram left them and they reached their car, the driver opening the rear door to admit Anna and her wife. As they sat, a shadow emerged from Anna’s shadow to sit opposite them and Jason appeared from within it.

"Anna," he greeted, then turned to Anna's wife. "Susan. We haven't met since I obtained those paintings from your gallery."

"The paintings by Dawn," Susan said.

"Have you actually met the artist?" Jason asked.

"No," Susan said. "She always worked through an intermediary."

"I'll introduce you if I get the chance. She was killed alongside my brother but she'll be back, sooner or later."

Susan frowned but Anna forestalled questions with a shake of her head.

"Are you here to kill us?" Anna asked.

"I'm here to thank you for getting the bodies sent home," he said. "It would have been awkward to make arrangements myself, given the circumstances."

"Asya was a friend," Anna said. "Were you and her...?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm doubly sorry. There was talk of using the bodies or this funeral as bait," Anna said.

"I know," Jason said. "Thank you for putting a stop to that particular idea. My sister-in-law and I have our issues but she deserves to say goodbye to her husband in peace."

"You should know that the Americans may soon be too busy to direct more attention your way," Anna said.

"I'm aware," Jason said. "The Cabal leadership are looking at waking up old vampires, and both the Network and the Cabal are seeing dangerous splits between the leadership and the bulk of their membership. Medieval bloodsuckers and a potential magic civil war, all while the world is slowly being transformed."

"You know a lot. Have you been talking to Craig Vermillion?"

"No, Anna. I've been spying on you."

"Oh. Then you know about the gift I got for you?"

"I do. And thank you, even if it does play into your agenda."

"Be careful with it," Anna said. "I'm not entirely convinced it isn't a trap."

"The same has occurred to me. I'll be cautious."

"Mr Asano, the days ahead are going to be dark and full of chaos. Probably worse than what we've seen, if Vermillion's estimate on the number of ancient vampires is even close to accurate. Is what you're doing going to stop it?"

"I can stop the transformation events and cut off the reality core supply. Eventually. It just got harder now that I have to change up my methodology to avoid being hunted down."

People want what I have and it doesn't stop with the Americans. Being distracted by wider events isn't the same as giving up."

Anna nodded.

"There was some concern that you would lash out in revenge."

"I'm not strong enough to go after the gold ranker."

"I meant against the Network at large."

"Without the Network's tactical team having the courage to defy the gold-ranker, I would have lost even more people. I know that they were acting against the Americans rather than for me, but I'm grateful, nonetheless. I won't repay that with ill-placed vengeance."

"A lot of people will be glad to hear that."

"I won't deny I felt a powerful urge to start clearing out Network branches one by one," Jason confessed. "It was a closer thing than I'd like to admit, but there would be no coming back from that. Having power gives me a chance to do the things I need to, even when others say I shouldn't. Unfortunately, it also gives me the power to do things I want to, even when people are right that I shouldn't. It's a path to making costly mistakes."

"It was the Americans who did this, Mr Asano, not you."

"I could have done it differently. More carefully. I have to, now, but I could have from the start and kept others out of it. Not considering the consequences of my actions to the people around me is a lesson I've failed to learn before and this time it wasn't just a close call. The people around me paid the price for my arrogance and short-sightedness. Perhaps this time I will finally learn."

"What will you do now?"

"I'll make use your gift. Force the Americans to refocus their gold-rank assets on the transformation zones instead of me. Then I'll get back to the job that my brother, Asya and my friend died for."

"Good luck, Mr Asano."

"And to you, Mrs Tilden."

Jason's shadow rose up to engulf him and he was gone.

A contingent of people from two Japanese clans had arrived in Australia and settled in Asano village. First were members of the Asano clan forced out by Noriko Asano as she wrested control of the clan from her son. There were only a handful of them, being the former clan head, Shiro, and his closest family.

Shiro's daughters, Akari and Mei, had been travelling with Jason since his trip to Japan. He had sent them to Asano Village due to the clan turmoil and now had followed with the rest of their family. Jason met with Shiro, without anyone in the village being aware that he had returned.

"Thank you for seeing my daughters safe in the most trying of circumstances," Shiro said as they met in the house Shiro and his family had been assigned. It was a large home out in the bushland, surrounded by trees. "I know you lost people of your own."

"It was fortune, rather than any capability of mine," Jason said. "You should thank the Network tactical team that unravelled the trap."

"You are modest. My daughters have told me of how powerful that category four was and you fought him, face to face."

"Did they tell you I lost? It was an escape, not a victory."

"Nonetheless, Akari wants to keep helping you. She knows how important what you are doing is."

Jason shook his head.

"I've already made that mistake before. The way we will be operating now, Akari can't participate. It will just be Farrah and myself."

Shiro nodded.

"I am glad, to be honest. I know I should let my daughter make her own choices but I would rather have her close and safe. Thank you for giving us sanctuary in hard times."

"I'm honestly not so sure how secure this sanctuary is," Jason said. "Farrah is working on activating some of the stronger defences as we speak but forces are emerging that are stronger than any of us. I'm afraid of this village becoming a target."

"We will do our best to defend it, if it comes to that," Shiro said.

"I appreciate that," Jason said. "Having more silver-rankers here gives me some peace of mind."

The second contingent from Japan had arrived with the Asano clan, despite their recent conflict. The Tiwari clan's core leadership had tried to dig out those who had acted against Jason, only to find much of the clan turning against them. Playing on the unrest stirred up by Jason's interaction with the Tiwari leadership, the leadership of the Network's Kobe branch had taken advantage.

The network supported a coup by a hidden faction of the Tiwari clan, in return for information about the magic door they had been guarding for centuries. Handing the door over to an outsider had been more contentious to the clan than the patriarch has realised

and he found his entire family expelled. The two former patriarchs, Asano and Tiwari, realised they were in similar circumstances and both turned to Jason.

"They call fulfilling our ancient purpose a betrayal while selling out everything we are to the Network," the ousted patriarch explained to Jason. There were more exiled Tiwari than Asano clan members and they had been assigned to a cluster of houses in the village's beachfront area.

Koya Tiwari, Itsuki's father, also thanked Jason for bringing his son alive through such a dangerous trial.

"He is not happy that you are leaving him behind," Koya said. "I confess that I am."

While Jason had quietly met with the exiled patriarchs, Farrah had been activating additional defences around the village. These were protections that she had put in place from the beginning but never activated due to the cost. Afterwards, as she and Jason flew away from Asano village in Shade's plane form, she discussed an issue with Jason that had come up during the activation.

"Is there a problem with the defences?" Jason asked, seeing Farrah's troubled expression.

"Just the opposite," Farrah said. "It worked too well. I was able to put the stronger defences in a semi-dormant state that consumes minimal resources, only becoming active and power-hungry as needed."

"That's great. Which makes me wonder why we didn't do it that way in the first place."

"Because we couldn't. The ambient magic was too low, even with the magic-collecting systems built into the village's infrastructure."

"You're saying that the ambient magic is rising?"

"We built those defences a year ago and since then we've had the monster waves and the transformation events. I think they are causing a more precipitous rise in the magical density than any of us realised, even Dawn."

Rainbow light burst into place in the middle of the plane, fading after an instant to reveal Dawn. Her new avatar projected a silver-rank aura.

"Miss Hurin is quite right," she said.

Chapter 392

Inevitability

As Jason and Farrah flew through the air in Shade's plane form, the sudden manifestation of Dawn's new silver-rank avatar took them aback, and they shot out of their chairs.

"I have some questions," Jason said to Dawn. "They can wait until you get some clothes, though."

"I apologise for the impropriety," Dawn said as Jason turned around and pulled some of Farrah's spare clothes from his inventory, handing them backwards.

"No worries," Jason said. "I know what that's all about. Waking up naked in other universes is kind of my thing. Welcome back, by the way."

"I made some enquires while I was using my true body again," Dawn said as she quickly slipped on jeans and a t-shirt. "I have something for you, next time you return to Australia."

"We've just come from there," Jason said. "We probably won't be back for a little while."

"It isn't urgent," Dawn said. "It's personal, rather than a part of our task."

"You told us you couldn't create an avatar above normal rank," Farrah said to Dawn. "I take it this new one being silver has an unfortunate connection to the rise in Earth's magical density."

"Yes," Dawn said. "Each proto-space that becomes a monster wave pushes more energy from the astral through the dimensional membrane of this world, degrading the membrane as it does. The inactivity of the grid only saw an increase in monster waves by a third, given how many go unnoticed in the depths of the oceans, but that increased activity appears to have crossed a threshold, accelerating the degradation."

"Which is triggering the transformation events," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn confirmed. "They are an unintended consequence of the original Builder's designs for this universe being affected by the rising magical density and the influx of magic through the link to the other world. It also means that I can project a more powerful avatar into your world without causing further damage."

"Does the damage done already mean that the transformation events will continue, even after we normalise the link?" Jason asked.

"It's possible," Dawn said, "but unlikely. The most probable case is that the transformation events will end once any one of the three factors is removed. Since the

intrinsic makeup of your reality and the magical density can't be undone, that leaves restoring the link to its original state, or as close as we can manage. Without surges of magic coming from your world, Miss Hurin, it should stop triggering the events."

"Does this accelerate the timeline for the destruction of Jason's world?" Farrah asked.

"Yes," Dawn said. "It will still be decades before the planet becomes uninhabitable, but even if the link is repaired on the most optimistic schedule, earth's dimensional landscape will forever be altered. Dimensional instability. There is little chance of completing the work before Earth's magical density crosses the iron-rank threshold."

"Does that mean what I think it does?" Jason asked. "Direct magical manifestation?"

"Yes," Dawn confirmed. "No more proto-spaces. Monsters, as well as essences and awakening stones, will start directly manifesting. Once that happens, repairing the link on this end will be critical to prevent even more accelerated degradation of the dimensional membrane. Additionally, once the changes to the link on this end are completed, you will have slowed things down enough that you will have years in the other world to fix the link on that side."

"Won't directly manifesting monsters be good from a safety perspective?" Farrah asked. "Instead of silver and gold-rank proto-spaces, they'll be dealing with iron-rank monsters, maybe the occasional bronze."

"I mentioned dimensional instability," Dawn said. "By that stage, the dimensional membrane of this world will be poked full of holes. There will be isolated zones of bronze, silver and possibly even gold-ranked magical density that remain permanently in place."

"Like my world," Farrah said.

"It will lean more toward the lower ranks overall than yours, but yes," Dawn said.

"My world can't handle that," Jason said.

"Yet it must," Dawn said. "What I am describing is, at this point, an inevitability."

"If gold-rank monsters just start showing up," Jason said, "we don't have the people to deal with them. They'll render whole sections of the world uninhabitable."

"Yes," Dawn said.

Jason let out a groan as he slumped back into one of the planes luxurious black chairs.

"This is getting further and further out of hand. I was meant to save the world but it just keeps getting worse and all I've accomplished is leading people I care about to their deaths."

Dawn frowned.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

“The USA,” Farrah said. “The Network is currently splitting down the middle over the its role with everything that’s going on. New alliances are being formed across old branch and geographical boundaries while the rank and file versus leadership are the new fault lines. What this adds up to is someone we worked with in Australia getting her hands on the location of the US Network’s reality core secure storage and giving it to us. That’s every reality core from every US branch, aside from the ones being experimented on or use to wake up however many gold-rankers they have.”

“We’re going to steal them,” Jason said. “The hope is that will force the Americans to go all out collecting more.”

“Meaning using their gold rankers to fight for cores in transformation zones to replenish their stocks,” Farrah clarified. “Which would give them less time to get in our way.”

“We know the information is unreliable,” Jason said. “The information made it to Australia, there’s a good chance it was planted as a trap or the leak was discovered and the cores have already been relocated. Even so, we think it’s worth the risk for the pressure it would put on the Americans and take off us.”

“Do you?” Dawn asked. “You admitted your self that the information is questionable at best. It also distracts you from your purpose. You need to examine your own motives, both of you. Is this truly the best option or is it simply the revenge you have the strength to take since you can't go after a gold-rank enemy?”

Jason looked like he’d been slapped and was about to shoot back invective before stopping himself.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered unhappily.

“No, the objective is worthwhile,” Farrah insisted.

“Yeah,” Jason said, “but is it a plausible outcome? Honestly? Dawn’s right that we aren’t thinking straight. There are too many variables.”

“I can crack any magic protection the ritualists of this world can throw out,” Farrah said.

“But can you do it while dodging all the non-magic protection?” Jason asked.

“Drones, motion sensors, biometric locks. What if it’s an underground bunker with one way in and forty silver-rankers around it? What if we carve our way through all of that – which we can’t – and the cores are already gone. The American silver-rankers might not be Adventure Society elite standard but they’re a lot better than anyone else we’ve seen here.”

“We can scout it out. Formulate a plan.”

“And how long do you spend on this operation?” Dawn asked. “Time is more critical than ever.”

“I just...”

Farrah clenched her fists in front of her.

“...I just really want to kill someone for what they did.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” Farrah asked testily, rousing an angry expression from Jason.

“Yes, Farrah, I do. It was my brother. My girlfriend. My childhood friend. You think every fibre of my being isn't baying for blood? My family are still living inside my soul and they're scared because the sky is red and every single thing in there is razor-sharp.”

Jason's aura came pouring out in an angry wave, crashing over Farrah before he forcibly reined it in.

“I'm sorry,” Farrah said faintly. “I shouldn't have said that.”

Jason nodded.

“We're both on edge. I say some stupid things at the best of times.”

“You should redirect your destination,” Dawn said. “Start looking for the next node.”

“No need,” Jason said wearily. “We're already on course. The next place we need to look is in a sandwich.”

“What?” Dawn asked.

“You're an idiot,” Dawn said as she, Jason and Farrah emerged from a shop called the brown jug in Sandwich, Massachusetts, with a large bag of sandwiches.

“What?” Jason asked. “So, they don't capitalise the name of their shop. These sandwiches still look pretty good.”

“They do look quite good,” Farrah agreed.

“And how often do you get to eat a sandwich in a sandwich?” Jason asked. “The concept itself is like a sandwich.”

“Please stop saying sandwich,” Dawn said.

In the time it had taken them to reach Cape Cod, the Network had already set up operations and breached the aperture that Jason and Farrah were targeting. For this reason, they had decided to wait for them to wind down after killing the anchor monster.

With how thin the Network was stretched at the current time, they would not be as thorough about sweeping proto-spaces for loot and Jason was going to wait for them to go in and out before making his own intrusion. Even if there was little time left, Jason's ability would extend the stability of the space.

That left the trio meandering down the streets of Sandwich, eating what Dawn was forced to acknowledge was a pretty good sandwich. Wandering by the town pond, Jason found an unobserved spot to let his family out of the spirit vault where they had spent weeks in isolation with very few reprieves. He hadn't even risked letting them out for Kaito's funeral service and their time in his spirit vault had grown less pleasant in the time since Kaito's death. Jason might be able to hide it on the outside but his rage and shame were made manifest for the people living inside his soul to see. A summer outing in Cape Cod was a blessed relief.

"How many awful sandwich jokes has Jason made?" Erika asked as Jason handed out food from the bag.

"All of them, as far as I can tell," Farrah complained.

"I'm eating a sandwich in Sandwich," Jason said. "How can I not make a meal out of that?"

"I stand corrected," Farrah complained.

Erika watched her brother. His eyes that weren't really laughing and the smiles that didn't turn the corners of his mouth quite the way they should. She had seen him at his lowest and knew that for all he had changed, for all his power, there were still dark holes into which he could descend. She wasn't sure if the façade he was putting up was healthy but at least he was trying. She remembered the times when he hadn't been.

As they had an impromptu picnic on the grass, Erika pointed a nervous Emi toward her uncle, standing alone as he stared out over the water.

"You need to tell him," Erika said.

"Can't you do it?"

"No," Erika told her daughter. "You have to take responsibility for your own choices."

Emi had a hesitant path to Jason, slipping her hand into his. He smiled sadly as he continued to stare out at nothing.

"Uncle Jason."

"Yes, Moppet."

"I... don't think I want to fight like you do. I don't want to be an adventurer."

Jason turned to look at his niece, looking back with fearful eyes. Jason crouched down, gave her his first unabashedly happy grin in a long time and swept her up in a hug.

"After Uncle Kai," she explained as Jason continued to hold her tight, "I don't think I want to kill things."

"Good," he said.

"You're not disappointed?"

"Not even a little bit," he said. "You have to do what you want to do, Moppet. Not what you think I want you to do."

"But you spent so much time training me. You even took me out of school."

Jason let go of the hug and held her by the shoulders, locking eyes with her to convey his sincerity.

"You think that was a waste? You got lots of exercise, learned self-discipline and magic. What's wrong with that?"

"Does this mean I have to stop learning magic?"

"Don't be silly," Jason said, tussling her hair. "The other world has a whole Magic Society, you know that. Farrah's already a member. They'll be ecstatic to get a brilliant young lady like you on the books."

"I can still go to the other world?"

"I need you where I can keep you safe, Moppet. I have friends I can trust there."

Jason felt lighter as he let his niece walk him back to the group. He knew there was a lot of himself in her and was happy that she wouldn't insist on following his path and paying the price it cost to walk it. Even so, he would see her trained properly. He knew that he likely had a little Clive on his hands and she would inevitably want to explore a world full of mystery and magic. He would make sure she was ready.

Jason's family were only out a short time, for the sake of caution, before returning to the spirit vault. Farrah went with them, so she could be carried into the proto-space with Jason. When he entered a proto-space alone, he didn't even need an aperture. They had only used apertures in the past to let the rest of the team in but Jason was not going to do that again.

The reason he hadn't directly entered proto-spaces in the past was that he needed space and uninterrupted time to conduct the rituals that would help him find the next node. This had been the main role of the team and their absence would make things harder, especially without Greg and his excellent zoning abilities. Now, half the team was dead and Jason would no longer risk anyone else. That left no reason to use apertures and deal with the Network.

Shade had been keeping an eye on the Network's operation, notifying Jason as it wound down and they withdrew. They even sealed the aperture back up to avoid mishaps, leaving only a pair of guards behind at the aperture site.

Jason took that as his opportunity to enter, picking a spot well away from any essence users he could sense due to his inability to hide his aura while transitioning through the dimensional boundary.

Jason let his aura blend into the ambient magic until he felt almost indistinguishable from the world around him. As he reached what felt like a oneness with the universe, his body blurred and vanished as he slipped through the membrane of reality. He let Farrah out of the spirit vault immediately on arriving in the otherworldly space. It was a primordial realm of rocky terrain, turgid water, stunted plants and hot, heavy air.

“That was weird from the inside,” she told him. “It was like your whole soul garden suddenly expanded off into the horizon for a moment. There was this strange sense of being connected to the whole of reality. Is that’s what it’s like for you?”

“I’d more describe it as tingly,” Jason said.

“Tingly?”

“Yep.”

“You have the soul of a poet.”

“Didn’t you just say I had the soul of a connectedness to all things?”

“Just shut up and get on with saving the world.”

Jason and Farrah had been forced to devise new approaches to making sure the ritual was not interfered with by wandering monsters. What they came up with was a trio of solutions, the use of each being predicated on the strength of the proto-space. The first option was for low-ranking proto-spaces where the monsters were weak. In such cases, Jason would just blast out his aura at full strength and range, which would scare off any low-ranked monsters. Farrah would mop up the monsters that still approached.

The next approach was for more powerful proto-spaces where the monsters could pose a potential threat. In this case, Jason would still project his aura, but modulated to seem weak and vulnerable. Then he would open up a can of afflictions on the would-be predators and let butterflies of doom deal with them, clearing out a large enough space for Jason to work.

The final approach was for the strongest, gold-rank proto-spaces, should they run into one. If possible, they would avoid them altogether, with alternate avenues being worth more than the risk of being eaten.

Whatever the approach, Farrah’s role was playing cleanup and intercepting any monsters that still wandered by. It wasn’t as reliable as having a team patrol the zone, but even if there were some interruptions, they were confident they could make it work. In this particular instance, they were lucky in that the Network had abandoned it and the monsters were low-ranked. It was only the first of many times they would go through the process, but this time, at least, it went off without a hitch.

Chapter 393

The Edge of Madness

Jason, Farrah and Dawn travelled from place to place, in search of nodes to repair. They used the grid interface in the cloud house to choose their next destinations, refining their accuracy as they learned more from each proto-space and node they explored. After the USA was Canada, Tanzania, Myanmar and more.

They lived an isolated life, along with Jason's family, as people meant nothing but danger. Seeking help from others was exposing vulnerabilities, while those who genuinely willing to help would themselves be in danger by association.

Their methodology would start by using the cloud house's grid interface to detect a suitable target area, then travel there and set up the cloud house as a home base. This allowed Jason's family to safely live outside of Jason's spirit vault, which was slowly becoming less inhospitable but was still far from welcoming.

Once they arrived in a region, Jason and Farrah would wait for proto-spaces to form, in order to go in and identify the right node. They became increasingly proficient at the sequence of entering a space, performing the ritual and getting out before the Network was any the wiser. When possible, they covered any trace of the rituals, hoping to keep the Network unaware of their patterns.

The current lifestyle of Jason and the others afforded a lot of downtime as they travelled or waited on proto-spaces to manifest. Jason and Farrah took the time to maintain a regimented training schedule, which was not always possible when things were busier. Farrah had constructed a new set of exercise equipment for their heightened attributes, as any non-magical weights heavy enough to be valuable were too heavy to be practical.

Other time was spend on magical theory. Dawn continued to teach Jason while Emi learned from Farrah. After making her decision not to follow her uncle, Emi had been reinvigorated, going as far as choosing a magical specialty. Farrah advised against making the choice too quickly, wanting her to see the breadth of options the other world had to offer.

"Fortunately, thirteen-year-olds are famous for taking good advice when presented with it," an exasperated Farrah told Jason while they were doing their physical training, which made him laugh.

"What is it that she wants to learn?" he asked.

"It's a very niche field related to mine," Farrah explained. "I'm a specialist in formation magic and arrays. Permanent and semi-permanent versions of ritual magic, which is one of the core magical fields. It's less specialised than, say, astral magic, which is why I have a broader knowledge base than you're developing, able to tap into a lot of areas."

"Okay."

"What Emi is looking at is a specialised version of my field called formation interactivity. You understand that putting magical formations close together is tricky because they interfere with each other, right?"

"Yeah," Jason said.

"Formation interactivity is the study of the effects of having formations close to one another. At a basic level, it's about reducing the effects so that formations can be used in closer proximity. Advanced applications involve generating positive interactions but that is not a developed area of study. It's also notorious for being one of the most impenetrable branches of magic, which is why it's underdeveloped."

"And my niece has got it into her head to be a groundbreaker," Jason said.

"She's implausibly smart, I'll admit," Farrah said. "Even so, that field is a career. If that's the way she wants to go, she wouldn't have time to be an adventurer. That's locking yourself in a room and never coming out research."

"I assume your intention is to keep working on her foundational skills until you get her into a Magic Society branch and broaden her horizons?"

"That's exactly my intention. My concern is that she's as stubborn and unpredictable as you and your sister."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Jason said.

While the cloud house life was largely isolated from the world, the internet was a window into what they were missing. There was always at least one online news feed running somewhere and as weeks passed they became increasingly happy to be missing it all. As they hid away, quietly completing their tasks, the world was ever more precipitously teetering on the edge of madness.

"Is that a centaur?" Jason asked, glancing at a wall monitor after emerging from the showers post-workout.

"No," Farrah said, likewise emerging. "It's a lot of centaurs."

"I know Salzburg has an old-world charm," Jason said, "but there weren't centaurs around when we were in Austria, right?"

"There were," Dawn said. "Like other members of the Cabal, they have become experts at hiding their presence over the centuries."

"They'd have to," Jason said. "You can't hide being half-horse with a pair of extra-loose slacks. My friend Craig once told me that all Cabal members can pass as human, shape-change into humans or otherwise have the means to remain hidden from the world. Usually a combination of illusion powers and isolation. Hillfolk, haunted houses, mysterious things in the woods and so on."

"That's an incomplete but sufficient description," Dawn said.

"Where do creatures like that come from?" Farrah asked. "The Cabal has always struck me as odd. How does a low-magic world have such overtly magical creatures? It hasn't even developed non-human essence-using species."

"Like so many of this world's issues," Dawn said, "It stems from the same original sin."

"Original sin?" Jason asked. "Are you going native on me, Dawn?"

"The connotations of the term are usefully descriptive," Dawn said. "It goes back to the way the original Builder constructed the seed of this universe using the patterns of existing worlds. There is a reason the other great astral beings intervened. This world is now ravaged by the ramifications of that choice while yours, Miss Hurin, is also being affected. Soon, it will also experience the consequences of the Builder's experiment in full force."

"Which we're going to unleash," Farrah said unhappily.

"You have to cut someone to perform surgery," Jason said. "If there's a better option, you take it, but sometimes there just isn't."

"Just so," Dawn agreed.

"So, the Cabal members are echoes of the worlds the original Builder based this on," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn confirmed. "Even before the magic started to rise, beings started to arise from the incongruities that resulted from the unconventional means by which your universe was established. It was rare, but over hundreds, thousands, millions of years they slowly emerged. Like other living things, they evolved. From simple magical entities to complex beings, they adapted to their environments over countless generations while still being shaped by their origins. Because they were rare, even with the power they possessed, those that adapted to remain hidden are the ones that survived."

"So, they really are connected to the transformation spaces," Farrah said.

“After a fact, yes,” Dawn said. “All magical things will grow stronger over time as the ambient magic rises. Part of the reason that earth’s essence users are mediocre is that most of them spend most of their time suffering low-level magical starvation. These transformation zones seem to affect Cabal members even more than the rising ambient magic.”

“Which is why they’re winning out in the competition for reality cores,” Jason said. “The transformation zones they’re fighting in make them stronger.”

“If the Cabal is looking to revive a bunch of ancient vampires, isn’t that bad?” Farrah asked.

“I’m pretty sure it is, yeah,” Jason said. “There nothing we can do about it, though, except to keep doing what we’re doing. We’re two people, not an army that can run around competing for cores all over the world.”

“Exactly,” Dawn said. “It is wise to focus on what you can do and not concern yourself with what you cannot.”

The first node Jason successfully identified and repaired, right before fighting the gold ranker, turned out to be one of the ones they needed to find. The process wasn’t always reliable, with the nodes in the USA and Myanmar being false positives that didn’t need repairing. The only gains were that with each failed node, they would be better at eliminating further false positives as they refined the process of identifying further nodes. The nodes in Canada and Tanzania had been modified and Jason managed to rectify both.

As they worked, the descent into chaos that began with monster waves and transformation events started to escalate. In just a few weeks, things had grown increasingly worse as sections of major cities started to be caught up in transformation zones.

The Bankstown area of Sydney was turned into a city of low-level volcanic activity and stone buildings. The people there were primarily turned into the smoulder race, with onyx skin and glowing, fiery eyes. The area affected included Bankstown airport, which was the Sydney Network branch’s major transport and logistics hub. Not only did the Network’s non-essence user staff get transformed but their planes were turned into bird-like magical constructs. This rendered them inoperable without an essence user with the ability to use specialised magical tools, an ability that rarely appeared on Earth.

Earth had taken a magitech route, combining technology with magic. In terms of accessibility, convenience and cost, this was objectively better than relying on purely

magical devices. Magitech communication was much more convenient and vehicles didn't require someone like Clive with a special power to operate.

Pallimustus also had vehicles that could be driven by anyone but only operable in zones of high magical density. Only something like the vortex accumulator in Jason's cloud constructs could circumvent this problem, which was a level of magic engineering undeveloped on Earth. Magitech was much more suited to earth's conditions and advanced in different directions.

Bankstown airport was now covered in stone buildings, lava pooling in random areas and a bunch of giant metal birds that couldn't move. This hurt the Sydney network branch, especially as they joined a growing movement actively working against the Network's global leadership.

Three factions quickly emerged: The Chinese branches and those who allied with them, forcibly or not; the USA, who did not accept allies, and most of what was left. This faction was the largest, but also the most scattered and least stable. The people attached to the International Committee split rather evenly between the three factions.

The first two factions were focused heavily on claiming reality cores and accordingly became open rivals. The third faction took the name the Network had publicly been using, the Global Defense Network, and continued to intercept proto spaces. What they did do was change the American spelling of 'defense' and change it to the international 'defence.' Most government bodies continued to work with this faction, providing much-needed legitimacy and support.

Sometimes the transformation events were relatively peaceful, although this was rare. Coconut Grove in Miami, Florida was transformed into an elven utopia, with beautiful architecture interwoven with rich, sprawling gardens. The residents were transformed into beautiful elves which, while still traumatic, could have been far worse.

More common were cases like West Canfield, Detroit. The people were turned into goblins and their homes into underground warrens, which rapidly devolved into a lawless combat zone into which the National Guard was sent to restore order. After the first hideous former humans were gunned down, things devolved quickly.

Transformation zones fluctuated in area, from one or two kilometres across to engulfing entire large towns. Less-developed areas, like farms and countryside, tended to have larger areas affected, while events in cities were more contained. Despite the smaller scale, though, once major cities were impacted, it was as if an invisible line between stability and chaos had been crossed.

Conflict between the magical factions become more heated and harder to hide from the population at large. As open battle spilled out of the transformation zones, the people of the world realised that a war was being fought and that their only parts were innocent bystander or collateral damage. EOA superheroes fought the essence users of the Network, who themselves were caught up in infighting.

Driving the escalation was the knowledge that with each passing day, the mythological beings of the Cabal were growing in power as they operated more and more in the open. Centaurs, ogres, fairies and more variously delighted and horrified as they were spotted by the media and had their images revealed to the world.

The Cabal would have been dominating already except that, like the Network, current events had revealed old fault lines in their organisation. Factional infighting abounded as conflicts older than any living civilisation were taken up once more.

Government forces stepped in as best they were able as cities rapidly turned into battlegrounds. Government-Network alliances were strained or broken, which was often the best-case scenario. In China and the US, Network Deep State actors rapidly seized control.

The Global Defence Network faction did their best to hold everything together. The other Network factions were focused on their conflicts with each other, the EOA and the cabal as they fought over reality cores, allowing the GDN to claim the grid infrastructure and continue to intercept proto-spaces. Rapidly forming new agreements with world governments, they avoided the reality core war. The biggest problem was that many of their silver-rank personnel had been pulled into other factions, making higher-rank dimensional incursions difficult and dangerous to handle.

Emergency powers were enacted and martial law was put into place. The cities, which had been largely shielded from the monster waves, were now battlegrounds and people were fleeing into rural areas to escape the fighting. Jason, meanwhile, continued his work as weeks turned into months. At the same time he arrived in his latest location, Venezuela, the ancient vampires the non-Cabal factions had been worrying about made their presence known in the city of Venice.

Chapter 394

Trying to Be Merciful

In Venezuela, Jason identified and repaired another node. He was starting to get used to the process and had gotten the time required down to under an hour. After leaving the node space, he opened a portal back to the cloud house, currently disguised as a complex of hastily-erected prefab buildings in the mountain town of Galipan.

Close to Caracas, Galipan had long been a tourist staple but was rapidly turning into a refuge for mid-level government and military officials from Caracas and La Guaira. After a transformation event triggered open battle between the magical factions, many low-to-mid-level authority figures had immediately looked to escape.

Galipan had been overlooked by the upper-level officials, allowing the middling people to move in and force the locals out, claiming the inns and residences for themselves. The new prefab buildings were assembled for their support staff, not the displaced locals.

Jason's family had been laying low in the cloud house as Jason and Farrah once more went through a series of proto-spaces to pinpoint the right node. Dawn remained with the cloud house to intercept any danger, now that she possessed a silver-rank avatar.

No one left the cloud house other than Jason and Farrah. A bunch of foreigners would not be out of place back when it was a tourist village but now they would stick out like a sore thumb. They were all caught up watching the news from around the world as order continued to deteriorate.

Cities fell under martial law or became outright battle zones with soldiers fighting essence-users fighting superheroes fighting all manner of strange creatures. Channel after channel, news site after news site showed the world descending into disaster and unrest.

"...the 'puppet presidency' riots continue in many major US cities, with the new administration's attempts to mobilise the National Guard in response meeting resistance from some state governors..."

"...spokesperson stated that there was no internal strife in the CCP after the recent leadership changes, but with China's media blackout continuing, there is no way to know the true state of..."

"...infighting within the Global Defence Network has been blamed for the new monster surge in the small island nation..."

The family all sat together in the lounge room, watching as the world fell apart.

"It's like watching the end of the world," Erika's husband Ian said as Jason, Farrah and Dawn returned to the cloud house.

"That's what we're trying to avoid," Jason said and his family turned to look at the returning trio.

"How did it go?" Jason's father Ken asked.

"Another one down," Jason said. "Time to pack up and move on."

"Not quite," Dawn said. "There is still one more thing to deal with."

"What's that?" Jason asked, then tilted his head as if trying to hear something in the distance.

"Oh," he said as something entered the range of his aura senses, moving fast. "I'll take care of it."

"What is it?" Farrah asked.

"Some EOA lackeys," Jason said. "We've had a good run but someone was bound to find us eventually and the EOA is working with the government here."

"Why would the EOA go after you?" Farrah asked. "I thought North wanted you to do what you're doing."

"So he said," Jason told her. "Could be he was lying. Could be that he wants to test my ability to affect Builder magic after absorbing the door. Most likely is that he just hasn't told his organisation anything about it."

"What if his organisation ends up stopping you?" Farrah asked.

"Then Jason was never strong enough to get the job done anyway," Dawn said, then turned to Jason. "Deal with them and then we can depart."

A full twenty superheroes in matching pseudo-military outfits flew through the air, soaring up the mountain. As they closed in on the town of Galipan they slowed down and released a camera drone, in accordance with League of Heroes media protocols. They made their approach to the town low and slow, making sure the people there had the chance to notice them and to pull out their phones. The flying superhumans paused, hovering over the town and the new expanse of prefab constructions.

"Which one is it?" one of them asked their leader. "Should we start searching them?"

"No need," the leader said, nodding in a certain direction. The others looked, seeing a figure flying slowly towards them. It had a cloak of void black, spread out like wings, over a robe the colour of dark, dried blood. From within the cloak's hood was a pair of silver eyes that shone like starlight, while two blue and orange orb-eyes floated around him.

“Jason Asano,” the leader announced loudly, making sure his voice would be picked up on phone cameras. He spoke in English, which told Jason that this was all for the publicity.

“I am Autoridad,” the leader announced. “We are taking you and your associates into custody.”

Hovering in the air, the heroes spread out in a semi-circle around Jason. Jason’s wing cloak held him up and he looked almost like he was underwater as his cloak floated around him. The heroes had more sober and sensible outfits than their US counterparts, with their costumes bearing a militaristic and authoritarian style. The Venezuelan flag prominently on display. Venezuela was a country that had ousted the Network in favour of the EOA and their superheroes, an arrangement that was holding even through the current chaos.

“How much do you know about the process that gave you’re your extraordinary abilities?” Jason asked. “Did you know that the earlier, weaker versions of the process had a habit of turning people insane? The reason your generation doesn’t is that there is something inside you called a clockwork cor—”

“We aren’t here to listen to you Asano,” Autoridad cut him off. “Surrender or don’t.”

“I’m trying to explain why coming after me is a bad idea,” Jason said. “I’m trying to be merciful. I don’t know what will happen when—”

Jason was cut off again as eyebeams blasted from Autoridad in his direction. One of the orbs around Jason became a shield of force, rippling like water as it intercepted the blast.

“Look, banana republic General Zod,” Jason said. “This is your chance to walk away. Fly away, whatever. Please take it.”

“You essence magicians all think yourselves so powerful. You mentioned the weaker versions of us that came before. You know that they can boost their strength, yes? You may be arrogant enough to think that you’re stronger than all of us, but we now have a boost strong enough to work on us. Using the power of reality cores, we can become far more powerful than you.”

“Why are you the only one who gets to monologue? I thought I was the villain, here, superhero.”

Autoridad reached for an injector pen in a sheath on his belt.

“Don’t do it,” Jason warned.

Autoridad ignored Jason and grabbed the injector pen. Then he dropped it as he and all the other superheroes simultaneously started having seizures and fell from the sky.

They landed hard on the street below as people filming with their phones scattered out of the way. Jason floated down into the midst of the fallen heroes who continued to twitch on the ground.

Jason's cloak vanished as he alighted upon the ground, revealing an unconcerned face to the people filming him as he panned his gaze over the heroes. Silver liquid seeped out of their tear ducts as their twitching seizures come to a stop, along with their lives.

"So that's what happens," Jason muttered absently. Leveraging his soul attack was apparently quite effective against clockwork cores, due to the effect absorbing the door had on his ability to affect the Builder's magic. How it would fare against star seeds he didn't know but was looking forward to finding out.

The town was silent, people moving out of his way as he ignored them, walking over to one of the buildings. His family stepped out of it and he started absorbing the building into his cloud flask.

Once more flying over the ocean in Shade's plane form, Jason, Farrah and Dawn were in a small conference cabin, discussing their next destination.

"After refining the search parameters with the details from the last node," Farrah said, "we've got two viable target regions to search for the next. One is in Australia, the other in Europe."

"I would like to go home," Jason said. "I know the village has been kept out of everything we've seen on the news but I'd still like to check on it. There's also whatever mysterious thing Dawn arranged for us while she was between avatars."

"The question is Europe," Farrah said. "Venice had been entirely taken over by vampires. Are they looking to establish a safe haven for themselves and that's the end of it or is this just the beginning? Should we go now, before things get worse or give it time and wait for things to settle?"

Jason absently tapped a finger to his lips as he considered.

"Craig Vermillion suggested there's a lot more of these old vampires than we've seen," he said. "Especially in Europe. I think I'd prefer to know what we're walking into, even if it's bad, rather than be caught up in some kind of vampiric uprising."

"If we were," Farrah said, "maybe we could make a difference."

"We are making a difference," Jason said. "The sooner we cut off the reality core supply, the sooner the vampires go back in their box."

“Those cores aren’t like spirit coins,” Dawn said. “It will take time before they are consumed. Once the Cabal rouses their vampires, it will be some time before they return to slumber.”

“All the more reason to get this done, Jason said.

“We have had distraction enough,” Dawn agreed. “We are trying to help this entire world, not just some of the people on it.”

“Australia it is, then,” Farrah said. “Maybe it’s time to explain what you arranged for us. You said it was personal.”

“I’ll explain after Mr Asano’s sister is done with him,” Dawn said. “You and I should give them some privacy.”

There was an angry hammering on the cabin door and they could all sense Erika’s aura on the other side of it. Dawn and Farrah left the cabin, letting Erika in. Erika marched in and tossed a computer tablet on the table, paused on a video.

Jason didn’t ask, instead, reaching out to unpause the tablet.

“...disturbing footage and viewer discretion is advised. It would appear that the world’s first superhero has gone full villain, killing an entire team of Venezuela’s superheroes. The Venezuelan government have released a statement saying that this will impact their ability to prevent monster waves...”

Jason paused the video again and met his sister’s glare with a blank expression.

“What is it, Erika?” he asked softly.

“You’re just killing people on the news, now?”

“Yes.”

“What is my daughter meant to make of that, Jason? You know how much she looks up to you. She was scared of telling you that she didn’t want to go fight monsters with you and now she sees you slaughtering people on television?”

“Did they have the audio of that footage? They weren’t just coming for me, Erika. They were coming for all of us. I won’t let that happen. Not again.”

“And what? You’ll kill whoever it takes to make that happen?”

“Yes.”

Erika had been turned from angry to unsettled at the quiet determination with which Jason answered her questions.

“You were worried about the things you’ve done changing you,” she said.

“Yes.”

“You were right to be.”

With a worried look at her brother, Erika left the cabin.

"I know," Jason whispered to the empty room.

Craig Vermillion drove a small powerboat over Sydney Harbour, approaching a larger vessel and pulling up alongside. He tied off his own boat and hopped lightly from one to the other.

The larger boat was a modified fishing boat, to which a powerful chain winch had been affixed for dragging heavy objects up from the depths. Craig made his way past the crew, human minions of the cabal, and into the captain's cabin.

"Craig," the man inside greeted, getting up to shake Vermillion's hand.

"Franklin."

Craig looked at a large crystal bottle on the table, held securely in a foam-lined box. Inside the bottle was a purplish liquid.

"Is that it?" Craig asked.

"It is," Franklin said.

"Literal blue blood."

"I don't know how they make it," Franklin said. "I got a glimpse of one of their magic rocks. I'd rather be well out of all this, to be frank. Which I am."

"Still with that joke, Frank? You've been telling it for, what? Forty, fifty years? Has anyone ever laughed?"

"It's not really the time for laughter, is it?"

"Not an excuse, Frank," Craig said, then his shoulders slumped. "You know, if you don't want to be part of this, you don't have to be."

"I'm not one for rebellion, Craig."

"It doesn't have to be rebellion. You can just get out, let it all blow over."

"Do you really think that's going to happen?"

"The reality cores will only last so long," Craig said, gesturing at the bottle of modified blood. "Once they can't make any more of this, the old ones will go back to sleep."

"Assuming that your boy Asano somehow manages to undo all this mess."

"He will."

"He's one man. He's powerful, but compared to the old ones? We already know he lost to his own group's essence magician. This is the way things are, now, Craig. We need to compete."

"It doesn't have to be an arms race."

"Yeah, Craig. It does."

Vermillion sighed.

"I'm going," he said. "If I can't stop it, at least I won't be a party to it."

"You may come to regret that, Craig."

"When you're as old as us, Frank, regret is an inevitability."

"I suppose it is."

Franklin took out a memory stick and held it out for Craig.

"A list of safe houses and supply caches I don't think are on the books," Franklin explained. "No guarantees, though, so keep your eyes sharp. Security codes and protocols are all in there."

"They won't be happy if they know you gave me this."

"Then don't tell them."

Craig took the stick with a laugh and shook his friend's hand again.

"Good luck, Frank"

"You too."

"Are you sure you won't come with me?"

"Get going, Craig. You want to be long gone when we wake this guy up."

Craig went back to his boat and took off. He took the battery out of his phone and threw them into the harbour. Behind him, the huge chain winch on the boat stirred into rumbling, diesel-powered action. Craig and his boat were nowhere to be seen by the time it hoisted what looked like a stone sarcophagus from the water.

Chapter 395

Appreciation

In Asano Village, a portal arch quietly rose up inside a house. Cheryl Asano, Jason's mother, froze as if time had stopped. She had seen little of her youngest son since his return from apparent death, except on the news. She hadn't seen him at all since her eldest son followed him out into an increasingly mad world, only to return as a corpse. She had only seen his famous portal a handful of times in person. Like most people in Australia, she had seen it on the news as thousands of Broken Hill residents escaped through it to safety. She had watched everything she could find online about her son over and over again.

She gulped as her son stepped through the portal, his expression slightly surprised to find his mother standing right in front of him.

"Hello, Mother."

"Jason, I..." She trailed off, not knowing how to begin.

"Hold that thought," he said as Erika and Emi emerged from the portal. Neither had seen her since Kaito's death and, unlike Jason, immediately moved to hug her.

"I'm going to quietly go round people up," Jason said. "Mother, we're using your place as a gathering point because it's more discreet. I don't know how many people are the eyes and ears of outsiders."

"Jason..." she began but his shadow rose up, he stepped into it and was gone.

Jason found Taika in the village's main security office and happily grabbed the big man in a huge hug.

"I'm sorry about your bro, bro."

"Thanks, mate."

Jason had originally intended to take Taika as part of the team travelling with him, only to change his mind. He had not wanted to entirely deprive the village of people he could trust and rely on. Given that Taika would likely be dead otherwise, he was relieved at how it worked out.

"Bro, I saw you killing those superhero guys with your mind. They say you're a proper supervillain now but if the other guys are all dressed like tin-pot dictators, that pretty much makes you the good guy."

"You don't think I'm bad for killing all those people?"

"They came for you and yours, bro. Put 'em down hard and don't look back."

Jason knew that for all his jovial personality, Taika had seen dark days long before Jason came along. He didn't know the details but he knew Taika had left New Zealand to escape dangerous circumstances. Taika had become familiar with the cruelty and fickleness of death long before Jason.

“Taika, I need you to round up some people in the village and take them to my mother’s place.”

“What do I tell them when they ask why?”

“That it’s mandatory and you don’t know. Don’t mention me at all. Some of them will probably react poorly.”

“No worries, mate,” Taika assured him. “I got you.”

Jason was very good at hiding any kind of nervousness or uncertainty, both in his body language and his aura. He was visibly anxious as he sensed a group of people approach his mother’s front door.

They were the last to arrive by design, Jason having asked Taika to bring them last. There was no shortage of people present already, crowding even the generous, open-plan space of his mother’s house. Already arrived were Amy and her daughters, too young to understand what was going on. The Japanese Asano sisters and Itsuki were both present, as were the family of Jason’s deceased friend Greg. They had known Jason since he was a young teenager but now looked at him like a stranger. Between who and what Jason had become and the death of their son, Jason could feel the distrust and hostility in their auras plain and clear.

Jason was anticipating worse from the people Taika was leading to the door. The Karadeniz family, Asya’s parents and siblings, were taken aback as they saw all the people. When they spotted Jason amongst them, their expressions went dark.

“Mr and Mrs Karadeniz—”

The long legs of Asya’s mother let her stride across the room in just a few steps, loudly slapping Jason across the face. Jason had nothing to say, bowing his head the way he had before Greg’s family. He felt that his eyes should be welling with tears but that was not something his body did anymore. It had been years since Jason had been a human but he had never felt as inhuman as at that moment.

“Why are we here?” Asya’s father asked in a hostile voice.

Jason nodded absently, more to himself than anyone else.

“I have some friends who have afforded us a unique opportunity,” Jason said. “One that has, to my knowledge, never been afforded to anyone else on earth.”

“What kind of opportunity?” Greg’s father asked.

“One for comfort, I hope,” Jason said as he raised a portal. “Please all go through.”

“You seriously expect us to go through that?” Asya’s mother asked.

“If you choose not to, I understand,” Jason said. “If that is your decision, I won’t tell you what you missed. I don’t want you carrying that regret for the rest of your life.”

“Why not just tell us what’s through there right now?” Asya’s father asked.

“Because I don’t think you’ll believe me,” Jason said. “Even if you do, I’m worried about misunderstandings if you don’t see it for yourself.”

“Don’t play games,” Greg’s father said. “You’ve always liked playing games, Jason, but I won’t stand for it.”

“That’s right,” Asya’s father said. “What is on the other side of your magic door, Asano?”

Jason stared at him, hollow-eyed, for a long time.

“Your daughter,” he said finally. “Go through or not. All I’m offering you is the choice.”

“What are you—”

Shade rose out of Jason’s shadow. Jason stepped into him and was gone.

“Mum, are you crazy?” Asya’s brother asked. “He killed a bunch of people with his brain. That was two days ago.”

Jason used his ability to shadow jump between Shade’s bodies to avoid using up the energy of his portal. He appeared next to the other side of the portal, which was some twenty kilometres offshore from Asano village, atop a tower at the centre of his cloud palace.

Jason had finally used the palace configuration of his cloud flask. It produced a sprawling construct, floating on the surface of the Pacific as ocean waves failed to so much as make it shudder. It was solid as an island but smaller than the palace form Emir preferred as Jason usually deployed his cloud constructs in their adaptive forms.

The adaptive form offered both protection against search magic and camouflaged against direct observation. The palace was made up entirely in shades of blue and white that, from a satellite, would be indistinguishable from the water around it.

Even in the adaptive form, the palace was still sprawling and huge. A series of concentric rings made up the four-storey buildings, connected by covered, open-air walkways like the spokes of a wheel. At the hub of the wheel was an eight-storey tower with a flat rooftop designed as a lookout. This was where the portal emerged, the salty ocean wind blowing over it in spite of the elevation.

Jason waited, knowing that a discussion was taking place in his absence. Having finally admitted to himself that he was not as capable of moving people to act as he had once thought himself, he had left Erika and Emi to be his ambassadors. Even his short display with Greg and Asya's families showed him that he would only make things worse. To Jason's surprise, when someone finally came through the portal it was Asya's father.

"Asano, what do you mean by saying my daughter is..."

His words dropped away as he noticed the floating palace around him, the beautiful building made of clouds spread out before him. More people came through, spreading out along the balustrade that circled the tower roof and goggling at the palace. Erika moved over to stand beside her brother, hooking her arm into his elbow as they looked out at the palace below and the ocean beyond.

"You once told me that you came back to show me wonders," she said. "With all the horrors that magic has brought, it's easy to forget the marvels."

"I thought I would be the only magical thing in this world," Jason said. "I wish I'd been right."

There was a huge elevating platform in the centre of the flat tower rooftop and Jason directed everyone onto it. He could have opened the portal directly to their destination but he had wanted to prime them to witness the extraordinary. For that reason, he led them on a meandering path through the palace, picking up Ken, Hiro and Yumi along the way.

The interior of the Palace was more colourful than the disguised exterior, with the glorious sunset colours that were cloud construct default. It was also filled with the plants Jason had harvested during his long stay in the jungle astral space of the Order of the Reaper, with lush green leaves and vibrant flowers. Since they were all non-magical plants, just feeding enough plant, earth and water quintessence to the cloud flask allowed it to maintain them. The jungle plants gave the palace a lush, tropical feel, complete with rich, fresh aromas.

The group had lost any notion of interrogating Jason for the moment as they toured the wondrous space until Jason brought them to a vast and empty chamber. It was circular in shape, with a ceiling high above them. The only things in the room were Dawn, Farrah and three of Shade's bodies. Each instance of Shade was standing in the middle of a hellishly complex ritual circle, all in a row. There was a fourth, empty ritual circle, positioned behind the line of three that Shade occupied. All four circles were piled high with spirit coins of all ranks, with even a diamond coin in each one.

"I'm sure you have all seen my companion, Shade," Jason said. Shade was, indeed, a well-known figure, even having been interviewed once when Jason allowed a media junket in Asano Village.

"What you may not know that that Shade's progenitor – his father, if you will – is an entity that governs the souls of the dead."

This caused a stir in the group, Jason sensing grief, anger and disbelief in their auras.

"This," Jason said while gesturing with his arm, "is Dawn. She is a deeply remarkable person, not just for her origins and power but for her kindness. Recently she took the time to contact Shade's father in order to give us all a gift. I don't even know what price she paid for this gift, as she refuses to tell us. Suffice to say, I am quite certain it was great."

"What are you talking about, Asano?" Asya's father asked. His shock at their surroundings was wearing off and his patience with it. "If this is some kind of nonsensical séance..."

"That's exactly what it is," Jason said. "What we have for you here is an opportunity that so many lost in grief can only helplessly wish for: a final chance to say goodbye."

As he sensed the sceptical affront rising from the group, Jason marched to the middle of the empty ritual circle and opened up a portal. This was not a normal portal, despite the identical look, but a medium for the ritual magic Dawn had put in place. It was an intricate work of magic far beyond Jason and Farrah's capabilities. He had been very careful crossing the sophisticated magic diagram, so as not to disturb it.

Dark streams of power flowed from Jason's portal into the shadowy forms at the centre of the other ritual circles, which immediately started to undulate. The group looked on in trepidation, anticipation, disbelief mixed with hope, fear and confusion.

Over the course of around a minute, the three dark shapes took on the forms of Asya, Greg and Kaito, but dark and semi-translucent, like ghosts. At first, they were unmoving, their expressions blank like dummies. Then they suddenly animated, roused from torpor.

"For the next nine hours," Jason said, "they will be here for you to say the things you need to say. This will never happen again, so don't leave anything unsaid."

At first, nothing happened. The three souls projecting into Shade's bodies as vessels were disoriented by the process and their loved ones were all in shock. Then Greg waved.

"G'day, Mum."

Like a dam had broken, Jason felt a maelstrom of emotion bombard the room as the group swarmed the three souls. Projecting through Shade, the ghost-like figures were oddly soft to the touch, as if they were made from the same cloud-stuff as the palace.

Dawn could have arranged a more realistic depiction but felt being too lifelike could be dangerous. Jason wholeheartedly agreed, wanting to avoid the desperate hope of resurrection.

Dawn was the leader of the Cult of the World-Phoenix, albeit on a working sabbatical. Before creating her current avatar and returning to earth, she had contacted her counterpart in the Cult of the Reaper, convincing him to allow Shade, a shadow of the Reaper, to act as a vessel to project the souls of Jason's fallen companions.

It was not a new or unique event, with contacting the dead having a long history. There were very strict rules, however, the most important being no discussion could be made on the nature of the afterlife. Other rules included the fact that each soul could only be contacted one time.

Jason watched as the group converged on their dead loved ones, wandering over to stand next to Dawn.

"I don't think I can express the graciousness of what you've done here," he told her. "All I can do is thank you."

"When I came to you to save the world, you didn't negotiate or ask for payment. You didn't try and pass it off. You got to work. Call this my appreciation for that."

Chapter 396

Brooding Loner

Vampires were neither strictly living nor strictly dead. Most of the undead were quite explicitly deceased, rendered animate by one force or another. In the case of vampires, however, that force was life energy, rendering them, to almost any test, alive. Some even considered themselves more alive than ordinary humans and treated their induction into the ranks of undead being as born again, much like an Evangelical Christian.

Many such vampires counted their age from the moment they were turned, although Franklin was not one of them. He was not dismissive of the life he had lived and did not disdain his long-dead family. His last relative had been a vampire, like him; a nephew turned by Franklin himself to save the young man from an illness long-since cured by humanity.

In more than a century of life, Franklin had learned that regrets were inevitable. He regretted not turning more of his family and he regretted that the one he did turn was such a disappointment. It was Franklin himself who had turned his nephew over to the Network to keep the peace after the latest in a long line of mistakes was too grave for the Cabal to ignore.

That had been before the world changed and the Cabal grew ambitious. Magic was not just exposed to the world but growing in strength. A land of stone and fire had arisen right in the city, Bankstown turning into a place of pooling lava and dark stone. The people caught up in the change transformed into a species with dark skin and eyes of fire.

Different forces, magical and otherwise took different attitudes to the transformed zones once any fighting over the reality core each held was settled. Most governments declared them disaster sites, off-limits to civilians, then worked with the Network to recover the transformed people and salvage whatever magical materials were found within. The EOA was generally the weakest competitor in the fight for reality cores and left once it was decided.

The Cabal would usually wait until the fighting was settled and then start occupying the zones. For reasons unknown to them, the transformed zones made members of the Cabal grow stronger. Many of the Cabal's members had hit a ceiling in terms of power growth, as if the world were not magical enough for them to get stronger. In the transformation zones, this was no longer the case as stagnant power once more flowed through the Cabal's members. As more and more transformed zones appeared, the Cabal

started moving towards overall parity with the Network that had been dominating for the last century.

Within the cabal, the boost in power meant the least to the vampires, who suffered from a different kind of ceiling. Although their powers never stopped growing, once they crossed a certain threshold, the world's magic was no longer enough to sustain them. As their might reached the invisible barriers imposed by reality that stopped the growth of others, they instead fell into torpor. This had placed the vampires in an awkward position within the Cabal, as the most powerful leaders of their faction inevitably surrendered their position to enter hibernation, lest they wither and die.

The vampires were in a rush to awaken their ancient ones, as they feared that the growth of the other factions would eventually lead to all the cabal having greater power. If the vampires were going to dominate, they needed to awaken the old ones as quickly as they could. Other members of the Cabal reluctantly went along due to the need to compete with the Network.

In the case of Sydney, the Bankstown transformation zone was not ideal for vampires. They were highly resistant to most forms of damage, but fire was one of those that had a greater effect. This meant that while the flowing lava streams weren't a wildly dangerous hazard, they made for an unnerving environment.

This did not bother Franklin, especially. He was a peaceful man who did not share the ambitions of many others in the Cabal and had never been dissatisfied with the way things were. He only spent as much time in the transformation zone as was necessary for his role in the Cabal, which is why he was unhappy to have been made manservant to the arisen ancient one.

Franklin had become sedentary over the decades, which had been costing him more and more in recent years. First, there was his nephew. As much as Franklin had despised the boy, Clinton had been the last family Franklin had. The end of his bloodline. Many vampires considered the other vampires they turned their children and Franklin had long considered this path, but again, his sedentary nature had left him not getting around to it. Another regret.

When Craig Vermillion had come to him, Franklin belatedly realised that he should have gone with him. Afraid of change, Franklin had declined, not realising that there was no staying the way things were. Change was coming and it was a matter of choosing which change to involve himself with. He quickly came to realise that he had chosen poorly.

Like many vampires, Franklin had considered himself a living witness of history. He discovered how naïve he had been when confronted with a member of the British Empire born in the early years of the 16th century. Every moment was now filled with regret that he had not disappeared with Craig and the other cabal members with the foresight to see what was coming.

The transformation events had changed the buildings of Bankstown into stone, usually very different from the ones that went before. The cabal had taken over the largest and most refined of them, a large stone manor, largely free of lava streams, with a luxuriously-appointed interior. It was the single aspect of the new world of which the ancient vampire, Lord Willoughby, unreservedly approved. There was no longer any utility infrastructure but that hardly concerned a man who had been hibernating in a sarcophagus since 1794.

One of the things he most disapproved of was modern clothing. For this reason, a small army of Cabal members had been dispatched to find something acceptable. As Willoughby lounged in a sitting room, in what no one dared tell him was women's underwear, a parade of clothing was presented. Each person presenting hoped that they wouldn't be the next one thrown into a hard stone wall when the lord's patience wore thin.

"My Lord," Franklin said. "I humbly recommend a more considered approach. The world has undergone many changes during your slumber. The essence magicians have grown powerful in your absence and—"

"Considered?" Lord Willoughby roared. "I have already considered the state of this miserable world and found it wanting! Jumped-up colonials thinking they can throw off the yoke of the Empire? Upstart sorcerers who would challenge the supremacy of the world's hidden rulers? The clothes alone are a travesty."

Franklin didn't voice his doubts on the degree to which the Cabal were ever hidden rulers directing human society from the shadows.

"My Lord, even the mortals have developed in ways that may come as a surprise. The capabilities of modern technology—"

"Are worthless in the face of overwhelming magical power," Willoughby cut him off.

"My Lord, I am merely making the humble suggestion that rushing to act before taking the time to learn may have unintended consequences."

"Do you think me a fool, Franklin? An ignorant buffoon, lost in time? Even in my day, we knew that if a servant kept insisting he was humble he was anything but."

"I apologise, my Lord."

“Of course you do, you gormless peasant. Have the glory devices been prepared?”

“We’ve prepared the cameras, my Lord.”

“Good. The Cabal of these modern times is a fallen beast. If magic is no longer hidden, then there is no excuse for the world not being under our heel. We shall begin with essence magicians and then the colonial government. The world shall see the glory of the new empire.”

Willoughby’s eyes lit up as someone brought in what looked like actual colonial-era garb.

“Excellent, finally.”

“Costume shop?” Franklin asked.

Having escaped the mad British Lord, Franklin was in a car with Nathaniel, the man who had brought in the approved outfit. Nathaniel was an ogre, when not in human form, and a long-time friend of Franklin and Craig Vermillion.

“Theatre costume department,” Nathaniel said.

“Smart,” Franklin said. “Unlike me. I should have taken the advice of our mutual friend.”

“He betrayed the Cabal.”

“Did he? Or is he trying to save it?”

“Be careful who hears your words, Frank.”

“Oh, I am, Nathan. I don’t have a way to contract Craig, which I arranged in order to protect him. It means that I am unable to express the degree to which I regret my choice. It also means that I can’t tell him that I could potentially arrange access to the reality core storage, should anyone be looking to get in there while a certain vampire lord was indulging himself in raiding the Network headquarters.”

“You’re taking a risk telling me this, Frank.”

“I’ve lost too much by leaving everything around me to stagnate. It’s time I started taking some risks. Is that something you can help me with?”

“I would never betray the Cabal,” Nathaniel said. “Of course, if I just happen to run into my friend Craig, who knows what might come up in conversation.”

Inside Jason’s cloud palace, floating on the ocean, the friends and family of Kaito, Greg and Asya were taking the chance to say goodbye. They had nine final hours, which proved a boon as it took some more time to accept what was happening than others.

Jason had created a large hall within the palace and once the ritual to call up the spirits of the dead was complete, he started modifying the cloud-stuff in the hall to fill the empty space with furniture. It was only moderately amazing to the group, most of which were getting their first exposure to the power of cloud constructs. After the ghostly souls of their loved ones returning, even the room transforming around them was only a mild wonder.

The event was essentially a wake, with two exceptions: the deceased were both present and cognisant and there wasn't any food. Although the food shortages of the monster wave months were slowly be remedied, the chaos following the transformation events was interfering with food distribution.

In that environment, Jason was not going to store a supply of food for entertainment purposes when almost everyone in his company was an essence user. Emi alone needed to eat, and only while she was outside of Jason's spirit vault. His soul realm turned out to suspend normal biological necessities, which left Jason both curious and glad. Curious, because he wondered what impact it had on the ageing process. Glad, because no one was going to the toilet in his soul.

Jason himself stayed quietly out of the way of the reunions, to the point of using subtle aura manipulation to push himself out of everyone's attention. A lot of the people present blamed Jason for the three deaths. He didn't want them wasting the last time they had with their loved ones on recrimination for him. That could wait until after.

As he watched everyone say their mournful goodbyes, he reflected on the people he had killed. From the beginning, he had worried about it becoming too easy and that had come to pass. Jason couldn't muster up any remorse for the people he massacred in Venezuela; only grim satisfaction that no more of his friends and family had been lost.

Jason waited as everyone else took their turn, sitting in a chair at the edge of the room until Farrah approached him.

"You're not being considerate," she told him as she sat on nothing, trusting him to create the cloud chair that rose up underneath her.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You're telling yourself that you're being considerate and letting everyone else spend the time with them. The truth is that you're scared. Scared to face them; scared that they'll blame you. Scared that they won't,"

Jason looked at her and then gave a slight nod.

"I suppose I am," he acknowledged.

“Don’t waste the time you have,” she told him. “Who gets this kind of chance? Don’t waste it.”

“You’re right.”

“Then why are you still sitting here with me?” she scolded.

Jason nodded, his cloud chair sinking into the floor as he stood up and made his way over to where people were surrounding the three dead guests of honour. Things grew quiet as Jason arrived near Kaito, whose soul was using Shade as a vessel. His body was dark and semi-transparent, looking every inch the ghost that he was.

“That’s some pretty rough sad face you’ve got their little brother,” Kaito said. “Who died?”

Jason was taken aback by the flippancy of his dead brother, unable to find words to respond.

“This is what’s great about being dead,” Kaito said cheerfully. “No one will tell you how bad your jokes are.”

“Your jokes suck donkey balls,” Jason said and Kaito burst out laughing.

“There he is. Excuse me, everyone; I need to have a private chat with my adorable little brother.”

“Adorable?” Jason asked as they headed away from the others.

“I’m dead, so I can call you what I like.”

“And here was me thinking that being dead might turn you into less of a tool bag,” Jason said. “I guess the afterlife isn’t turning into some enlightened being.”

Kaito’s image glitched like a television with a briefly-interrupted signal.

“Probably best to steer away from that particular topic,” Kaito said, looking queasy.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “Good thing Aunt Marjory isn’t here.”

Kaito laughed again.

“Did you know that she thought you were an angel?” he asked Jason.

“So I heard,” Jason said. “I wish I’d been there when she found out it was me.”

The brothers sat down, facing one another.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you,” Jason said.

“That was never your job,” Kaito said firmly. “Your job is saving the world, so don’t bugger it up. My wife and kids are on it.”

“I’ll do my best to see them safe,” Jason said.

“Just make sure you and my wife don’t comfort each other, reconnect and get married,” Kaito said.

“Oh, fuck you.”

Kaito's laughter erupted through the hall, drawing all eyes.

"And here I thought that avoiding bad language was the one thing you did learn from Mum," Kaito said.

"You're an arsehole."

"You can't call me an arsehole. I'm dead."

"I should take out a sandwich and eat it in front of you."

"Why would eating a sandwich annoy me?"

"Because you're dead and you'll never get to eat a sandwich again."

"Oh, you're right. That would be a dick move."

"You seem pretty happy for a dead guy but I won't ask how that works."

"I appreciate it," Kaito said. "You seem pretty cut up over me. It's nice to know you cared."

"No, I'm cut up over the other two. I'm faking it with you so Eri doesn't yell at me."

Kaito laughed before taking on a more sober expression.

"She's worried about you, Jason."

"I know."

"You killed a bunch of people on TV?"

"They were coming for all of us, Kai. As a publicity stunt. I had to drop them fast before they loaded themselves up with magic PCP. I didn't know it would kill them but I'm glad it did. I won't let what happened to you happen again."

"Did you tell her any of that or did you just go all emo and broody on her?"

Jason bowed his head, not meeting his brother's eyes.

"That's what I thought," Kaito said. "Jason, you've always done whatever you set out to do. You have a way of looking at where you are, looking at where you want to be and finding the path between. A lot of people can do that but not everyone is willing to pay the price. Hell, you got together with Amy and she's been in love with me since she was twelve. It wrecked you, yeah, but you got it done. It's pretty bloody intimidating, little brother."

"It's not always me who pays the price," Jason said, his voice breaking as he looked at his dead brother.

"I know. You need to watch out for that, but don't let it stop you. It's what makes you special. It's why I'm sure that you are going to save the world. If I'm being honest, I think it's why I think I did what I did to you. With Amy. You always had this determination, like nothing scared you and nothing was impossible. I never had that kind of courage. I think...

I think I wanted to prove that I could overcome that. That I was better than you. Amy, I think was trying to escape it.”

“Escape me.”

“Yeah. They were crappy reasons for the crappy thing we did. I’m sorry little brother.”

“Well, I did get you killed by an exploding wizard,” Jason said with a smiling mouth and sad eyes. “Your thing is still worse, but since this is the end, I guess I can forgive you.”

“Thank you, little brother. That means a lot.”

“Just to be clear,” Jason said, “forgiveness is about me being the better man, not you actually deserving it.”

“Oh, you asshole,” Kaito laughed, then once more he turned serious.

“Jason, I have something to ask you. Call it a belated dying wish.”

“If it’s a sandwich, I really can’t do anything about that.”

“It’s about the guy who’s going to save the world.”

“Well, that’s me. Unless you know something I don’t.”

“I know it’s you. I just want it to be the right you.”

“What are you talking about? Do I have an evil twin Mum never mentioned?”

Jason scowled.

“I bet she likes him more,” he muttered.

Kaito grinned.

“This is exactly what I want,” he said.

“Your dying wish is me ragging on Mum? Done.”

“Not that, you unfilial prick. I want the Jason who saves the world to be the one inexplicably obsessed with terrible TV shows that are older than he is, not the guy with the dead eyes who kills without remorse. I know you’ve seen a lot of terrible things. I know you’ve had to do some of them yourself. I need you to rise above that stuff instead of letting it drag you down. We kind of all need that because we’re relying on you, little brother.”

“It’s not so easy, Kai.”

“I know. But set out to do it and you’ll do it. That’s what you do. Are you going to refuse the last wish of your brother’s ghost?”

“I don’t even know where to start. The things I’ve done; the things I have left to do. It feels like I’m being dragged into a swamp. I’m not sure how to pull myself out.”

“By letting people help you, idiot. Being a brooding loner never works out. Even TV vampires figure that out by the end of the first season.”

“As if you’d know.”

"I watched vampire TV shows," Kaito said defensively.

"What vampire show did you watch?"

"You haven't heard of it."

"Look at who you're talking to. You didn't watch any vampire shows. If you say frigging Highlander..."

"I thought that was a movie about wizards or something."

"You think Highlander was about wizards?"

"I didn't like wizards. I watched a vampire show."

"What vampire show?"

"Forever Knight."

"Forever Knight?"

"See, I told you hadn't heard of it."

"All these years and only after you die do you reveal you did watch old TV shows after all? I can see why, given your choice. Forever Knight? A TV show based on a TV movie starring Rick Springfield - who they couldn't even get back for the show! The guy who sang Jesse's Girl was too busy for your terrible TV show."

"You realise that if you knew as much about magic as you did about American television from the eighties and nineties, you'd probably have saved the world already."

"Forever Knight was Canadian!"

On the other side of the hall, Erika had a tear in her eye and a smile on her lips as she watched her brothers loudly argue.

Chapter 397

High Maintenance

In the meeting hall of his cloud palace, Jason sat across from the spectre of his friend, Greg.

“I have no idea what to say,” Jason said.

“Wow,” Greg said. “I had to die to see it happen, but at least now I know what it takes.”

“I was going to get you a greeting card but I couldn’t find one for getting you killed by a wizard with bomb fists.”

“And there he is.”

“I looked into some print shops for a custom card but with everything going on, the wait times are egregious. As for online, you can just forget about it. Shipping delays are crazy.”

Jason’s smile was a pained rictus; a poor disguise for his obvious guilt and grief.

“I don’t want you mourning for me,” Greg said.

“You’re dead,” Jason said. “You don’t get a say.”

“At least put aside the guilt. I chose this.”

“I gave you the choice.”

“And the alternative is what?” Greg asked. “Do you even remember how miserable I was when you came back? I was never much more than an adequate lawyer and I’d been all but pushed out of my father’s law practice. I was staring down the barrel of a long, mediocre life. I lived more in the last six months than in the six years before it. Running around, fighting monsters with my magic powers. I got laid so much.”

“Mate...”

“I know, but I totally did. I met beautiful women from other dimensions and played board games with a vampire. I had magic powers. Steampunk magic powers. I got killed by a supervillain. I died fighting to save the world. Jason, if you told me everything that was going to happen – every single thing, including how I died – I’d have made the exact same choice. I’d have jumped at it.”

“Greg...”

“Don’t you dare pity me. You made my life a triumph. My death, too, for that matter. Don’t you ever try and take that from me by feeling like you somehow hurt me or made my choices for me. I died a hero, Jason, not a victim. You don’t get to turn me into one inside your head.”

"You seem pretty determined to not let me get a word in edgeways."

"That's because you'll just talk some crap. Look, we've been putting up with edgelord Jason for a while now but it's time to knock off the melodrama. You're not Darkwing Duck, so stop swanning about pretending you're the terror that flaps in the night. You're a god damn chuuni. You were a chuuni in school, you were a chuuni when you got back from magic land and you're such a giant bloody chuuni by you right now that you don't even realise you're more chuuni than you've ever been in your life."

"Please stop being saying chuuni."

"Jason you need the chuuni power."

"Chuuni power?"

"The Cabal is digging up an army of ancient vampires. You think popping out of the shadows doing a Batman voice is going to help against that lot? They've been pulling that trick since Constantinople; they're going to be better at it than you. If you want to beat them then you need to run your game, not theirs. Play to your own strengths."

"Which are?"

"A vampire is basically an ancient super chuuni. And in the land of the chuuni, the genre-savvy man is king."

"So, you're pretty much talking out your arse," Jason said.

"Yep," Greg said with a grin. "Sounded good, though, didn't it?"

"Not even a little. You just said chuuni about thirty times. You were babbling nonsense."

"Well, you gave babbling nonsense up to go all edgelord drama queen. Someone had to step up."

Jason ran a hand over his face.

"Is this what it's like talking to me?"

"It used to be," Greg said softly. "Back when you were actually fun. Yeah, things have gotten bad. You've lost people. But if you lose yourself, then everyone on Earth is completely buggered, so it's time to stop moping and put on your big boy pants. The floral print ones."

Jason and Greg looked at each other and both started laughing.

"You are really bad at the final guidance from a friend thing," Jason said.

"It wasn't that bad."

"It was pretty much you just saying chuuni and edgelord over and over."

"Take a look in the mirror, guy. You've been acting like a chuuni edgelord over and over."

“Harsh. You’re way better at making me feel bad than your Dad, although he’s giving it a good go.”

“Don’t worry about him. He’s blustering because he’s worried people will realise he’s just happy that I was the one who died and not my brother.”

Jason turned to glance at his mother across the room, in a group speaking with Kaito’s spectre.

“Yeah, I know that story,” he said, then turned back to Greg.

“I’m going to miss you, brother,” Jason said. “I’ll think of you every time I play a new board game you’ll never get a chance to try.”

“Oh, you prick.”

“You shouldn’t have called me a chuuni so many times.”

The streets of Sydney were much less congested than normal, in the wake of the transformation events. Government restrictions and business closures led to little enough traffic that the fleet of vehicles, mostly vans and SUVs, were able to sweep rapidly to the Sydney Network branch’s building.

Cabal members poured out of the vehicles, human forms transforming into a menagerie of bizarre creatures and mythological beings. At the head was the vampire lord, Willoughby. Oddly, there were what at least looked like ordinary humans operating camera equipment.

The Network branch's lower levels were largely filled with ordinary humans, many of whom had only learned the true nature of their organisation when magic went public. These were the administration offices for the businesses that had been both the source of funding and operational cover for the Network over the last half-century.

The lower floors became a bloodbath as the Cabal stormed the building. They had clashed with the network numerous times over reality cores but this was something different. The Cabal had invaded the Network’s home, intent on pulling them out root and stem. This was not a fight for riches or power but for survival. The Network’s tactical squads swiftly descended from the upper floors to engage the invaders.

Willoughby was startled by the resistance the Network put up. He had been warned repeatedly but he was not a good listener. Surprised was not the same as being defeated, however, and the vampire's might was not to be overlooked. When a powerful conjured machine gun ripped holes in him, streams of blood flowed out of the wounds and through the air like ropes. They entangled the man with the huge gun and dragged him into

Willoughby's waiting embrace. Draining the silver-ranker's blood rapidly restored his health and he pushed deeper into the building.

Shade was the vessel through which Kaito, Asya and Greg were projecting their souls and had control of how realistic those projections were. He was keeping them ghostly to prevent their loved ones from thinking the soul projections meant that resurrection was possible, although some still hoped in spite of assurances that it wasn't.

Shade's control meant that as Jason sat close to Asya, holding her hands in his, Shade could make them more solid, feeling like her actual hands instead of insubstantial ephemera.

"Greg and Kaito both told me I need to pull myself together," Jason said. "Is that what you're going to do as well?"

"Do I need to?" she asked. "Trust me to find such a high-maintenance boyfriend."

"High maintenance?"

"Oh, please, Asano. I love you but you are an absolute pain to deal with."

Jason's eyes went wide and she squeezed his hands.

"Yes, I said it," she told him. "It's not like I'll get another chance. I know you didn't get there yet, but you would have. I had no intentions of letting you go."

She tried to smile but didn't do a great job.

"I guess that's out of my hands, now."

"I'm sorry."

"For what? I hate to break it to you, Asano, but not everything is about you. You weren't a part of my life when I joined the Network. I made the choice to stand up and protect the world from whatever magic threw at it. I didn't want to die, but at least I died fighting for something worthwhile."

Jason nodded.

"I'm not going to tell you to pull yourself together," Asya said. "I'm going to tell you to stay focused. Keep your eye on what we died for, not the fact that we died."

"You don't want me going after the gold-ranker."

"You're right. All that gets you is revenge and that's not for us. That's for you, and you have more important things to be getting on with. Don't take stupid chances that cost you everything and get you nothing."

"He killed you."

"And killing him won't bring me back."

She poked him in the forehead.

“High maintenance. I’m dead and I still need to stop you from doing something stupid.”

“I wasn’t going to go after him,” Jason insisted.

“No?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

She gave him a flat look.

“I mean, if he came looking for me…” Jason admitted.

“Then you run. Run and hide like a scared little boy.”

“What if I can lure him into—”

“No. Promise me, Jason.”

“Fine,” he grumpily acquiesced. “I won’t fight the gold-ranker. It’s not like I was going to anyway.”

“Oh, please.”

Jason bowed his head.

“I don’t know if I can do it, Asya,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. “Everyone on Earth is relying on me, whether they know it or not, and I’m just making it up as I go.”

Asya’s ghostly form grew more substantial and she lifted his face with her hands, resting her forehead against his.

“You always have been, for as long as I’ve known you. How many times did I yell at you for insufficient debate prep? But it’s gotten you this far.”

“I’ve died,” he said. “Kind of a lot, and the world is coming apart at the seams.”

“And you’re going to save it. Then you’re going to be obnoxiously smug about it, but try and tone it down. You’re going to have trouble finding another girl willing to love all this.”

She leaned back and gestured at him with a sweeping hand and he grinned at her.

“Is that so?” he asked.

“You should listen to Greg and your brother,” she said. “Be the crazy weirdo I fell for.”

“I really want to kiss you,” he said, “but I would actually be kissing Shade. I’m pretty sure making out with your own familiar is crossing some kind of line.”

The deadline for Greg, Kaito and Asya's visitation drew close. Jason, Dawn and Farrah were meeting with them for the last time before handing them off to their families for their final goodbyes.

“You need to keep this guy in line,” Asya told Farrah. “He’s not as strong as you; he’s just good at faking it.”

“I know,” Farrah said.

“Hey...”

They made their last goodbyes and then the three ghosts went off to their loved ones, Jason heading toward Erika and the rest of the Asano family with Kaito.

“I love you, brother,” Kaito said as they walked.

“I’m going to bang your wife and raise your kids,” Jason whispered. “I’m going to make all three call me Daddy.”

“Oh my god, you’re an arse.”

As they waited out the clock for the three ghostly figures to reach the end of their time back on Earth, Shade quietly spoke to Jason.

“Mr Asano, there is a situation.”

Jason wandered free of his family to speak with Shade in private.

“Something at the village?” he asked. He had left one of Shade’s bodies at the village in case something happened while his family were all in the cloud palace.

“Not the village. The Cabal has initiated a full assault on the Network headquarters in Sydney. They are live streaming it and the news stations have picked up the feed. The military has been called out but this is far beyond them. The Cabal has one of the ancient vampires.”

Jason looked over at Kaito, Greg and Asya, talking with their families. Asya was keeping an eye on him and wandered over when she saw his expression. Kaito, Greg, Dawn and Farrah spotted her and followed.

“You have to go?” Asya asked.

“Yeah,” he said.

“What is it?” Farrah asked.

“The Cabal and their old vampire are live-streaming an all-out attack on the Network headquarters in Sydney.”

No one suggested not going. For all that they had fallen out with the Network, they all knew people there.

“Alright,” Asya said. “Go save the day.”

“Kick some arse, little brother.”

“Just remember to play the hero, not the villain,” Greg said.

Jason looked at them all for the last time.

“Whatever it is waiting for you on the other side,” he told them, “I hope it’s amazing.”

He opened a portal and stepped through. His portal ability was just strong enough to send three silver-rankers, allowing Farrah and Dawn to follow before the portal closed.

Kaito, Greg and Asya turned back to the group, all of which were looking at them.

“He’s coming back,” Greg assured them. “He’s almost definitely not going to leave you out here in the middle of the ocean.”

Chapter 398

Treachery or Cowardice

Nigel and his nine-person tactical section were retreating down a hallway on the fourth floor of the Network building. They had rushed downstairs in response to the Cabal's attack, only to encounter the people of the lower floors coming up, transformed into ravening ghouls. Undead monstrosities with a frenzied hunger for living flesh, they poured up the corridor like a wave, ignoring the gunfire slamming into them.

Becoming the undead had turned normal people into silver-rank creatures; far less powerful than even a weak silver-rank monster but still resistant to the attacks of bronze-rankers. The vampire lord knew this, so was surprised that the outnumbered tactical teams weren't immediately overrun.

Nigel's tactical team retreated in good order, despite only two members being silver-rank. Nigel had been the tactical instructor for the Sydney branch prior to Farrah's arrival and had worked with her to develop a retraining program for existing tactical teams while Farrah focused on new recruits. Nigel's own team used a mixture of traditional Network methodology and Farrah's more ability-centric approach to good effect. They had come a long way since they escorted Jason into his first proto-space.

Their discipline leveraged their capabilities effectively, with Jonno and Nigel himself laying down fire from conjured assault rifles as they fell back. Thorny had grown an extra pair of arms and was firing four conjured pistols while Digit was sending arrows downrange that exploded in blasts of fire and electricity.

Even with the gunfire laying waste to them, the ghouls kept coming. They wore the business attire of lower floor admin staff, with police and military uniforms mixed amongst them. The vampire lord had performed mass transformations on the dead killed by the Cabal, which was not limited to the Network staff. The police and military had been sent in as a response to the Cabal's brazen attack in the heart of Sydney, only to pay a deadly price at the hands of the vampire lord.

Nigel knew at least one of the teams that rushed down from the upper floors had been overrun. As his team had been pulling back in the face of a ghoulish wave, he had glimpsed the ancient vampire biting into the neck of another team's section leader and none of the team were responsive to radio checks. As far as Nigel knew, essence users couldn't be turned into ghouls but he was worried they could be turned into something worse.

The ghouls broke past the gunfire, rushing Nigel's team. The team stopped firing and Cobbo dashed forward from the backline to meet them. He wasn't running but hurtling through the air, his spear set like a jousting lance. It plunged into a ghoul and Cobbo's magically enhanced momentum stopped dead. The momentum all transferred into the ghoul, who was sent tumbling back into the others before exploding, ripping apart the closest ghouls and scattering the rest. It gave Nigel's team a reprieve as Cobbo fell back and the shooters resumed fire at the ghouls.

They continued withdrawing to the stairwell, the elevators having been shut off to prevent the Cabal using them. The next time the ghouls drew close, Jonno dropped his conjured rifle and called up a comically large rotary cannon that mowed down the ghouls, ripped apart the wall behind them and shattered the glass on the exterior wall beyond. More of the seemingly endless ghouls came streaming into the hall, unintimidated by Jonno's absurd display of power.

"I'm glad to see you changed your mind, Frank," Vermillion said, shaking Franklin's hand. They were standing under a bridge, away from prying eyes.

"It was changed for me," Franklin said. "I should have listened to you, Craig."

"It may be for the best you didn't," Vermillion said. "Now we know your idiot ancient one pulled everyone off the storage facility to go attack the Network."

"Not everyone," Franklin said. "We're going to have to fight our way in and out. It's our own people, Craig."

"I know. But it's the only time security will be light enough for that to even be possible," Vermillion said.

"Yeah," Franklin said, resignation in his voice. "We need to go now. Our window is small."

"Alright," Vermillion said. "Let's go."

Due to the propensity of proto-spaces and transformation events, five full tactical teams had been on standby in the building's upper floors and had moved down to confront the Cabal attack. Without the magical interference of a dimensional space or transformation zone, comms were working perfectly and the teams were able to coordinate.

Unfortunately, they arrived downstairs into the midst of chaos. The vampire lord had transformed an alarming number of the dead into ghouls and the cabal was using them as

cannon fodder. They refrained from engaging the Network teams, who they let exhaust themselves against the ghouls.

The Network's Director of Tactical Operations, who the tactical teams called the Ditto, was Koen Waters. He had ordered the teams to make a slow withdrawal back upstairs, giving the people on the floors above time to reach the magical defences of the Building's uppermost floors.

One of the five network teams was hit by the vampire himself and wiped out, while another lost cohesion and were broken up by the encroaching ghoul horde. The silver-rank section leader fell back with a couple of team members as the others were cut off, either caught by the Cabal or the ghouls or managing to escape. Some shot holes in the exterior windows, the bronze-rankers willing to risk a four-storey drop over facing the wave of undead.

The remaining three teams, including Nigel's, successfully reached different stairwells around the building. They were all on the fourth floor and worked to secure the stairwell entrances before moving up. In the case of Nigel's team, this meant Darce hurriedly summoning her steam golem to serve as a bulwark for the door. As she did that, Orange crouched down and put his hands on the top stair leading down, using his ability to weaken materials on the stairs below.

When Orange was done, he stood up and Nigel gave him an inquisitive look.

"What?" Orange asked in his abrasive bogan drawl.

"Why didn't the stairs collapse?" Nigel asked.

"The stairs will seem fine until a few of them get on there," Orange said. "Then they'll collapse and drop those undead buggers like sacks of sh—"

"We get the idea," Nigel said. "Good job."

Leaving behind the trapped stairs and the large summoned entity made of what looked like brass, they made their way up as Nigel reported in over the radio.

"Ditto, we've secured the East stairwell as best we can at level four and are moving up."

"Evac of floors five through eight is proceeding smoothly," Koen responded.

"Converge on the ninth floor armoury; that will be our first fixed defence point."

The ninth floor was where the Network's emplaced magic defences began and their magical resources were stored. It was the place where the Network could best leverage their advantages to repel attackers. The only reason the tactical teams had descended from there was to protect as many people from the lower floors as they could.

The team continued moving up. The stairwell was located on the building exterior and had glass on one side, allowing the team to look out at what was happening on the ground as they ascended. After the Cabal's open assault on a building in the Sydney CBD, authorities had intervened, cordoning off a large area around the building. The team saw where the cordon had been pulled back and expanded after an unsuccessful clash with Cabal forces.

"Since when do you have the level of fine control with your abilities to trap the stairs, Orange?" Digit asked as they double-timed up the stairs.

"I'm gettin' good at me powers," Orange said. "I've been practising like Instructor Hot Stuff taught us."

"You're a pig, Orange," Darce said.

"I only call her that because of her volcano powers," Orange said. "Do I also want to bang her like a drum? Yes, I do, but I'm a gentleman."

"So that's the secret to having you put in the effort," Digit said. "Have a beautiful woman to tell you to."

"Mate, that's no bloody secret," Orange said. "Send a pretty girl my way and you can get me to do whatever you... oh, bloody hell."

Each member of Nigel's section was keeping their head on a swivel and spotted the danger together. People with grotesquely elongated limbs were climbing up the exterior of building, their bare hands and feet adhering to the glass.

"The outside of the building is pretty reflective, right?" Darce asked. "Do they even know we're in here?"

Nigel raised his rifle and aimed at the window.

"They're about to."

"My ghouls should have overrun this place by now," Willoughby complained. "What is taking so long?"

"Again, Lord Willoughby, it's the essence magicians. They're far more powerful than they were in your time."

"This is my time, now. Who even are you? Where's my manservant?"

"I'm Richard, my lord. No one has been able to find Franklin since we arrived."

"Treachery or cowardice," Willoughby spat. "Either way, drag him in front of me the moment he's found."

Jason, Farrah and Dawn emerged on top of a tall building in the Sydney CBD, close to the Network building. Jason had first visited that rooftop to observe the building while still feeling out the Network, during his first days back on Earth. After getting their attention with his hospital faith healer stunt he had Shade follow the people who had arrived to investigate. That had led him to this rooftop.

They were surprised to find they were not alone on the rooftop, finding an army sniper team. Jason was worried about what their reaction would be until he felt a flood of relief from the soldiers.

"You're Jason Asano," one of them said.

"I'm wearing his underwear, so I hope so," Jason said.

"Thank god you're here."

"Aren't you meant to try and take me into custody or something?"

"Bugger that," the soldier said. "There's something down there. Something bad. It's killing people and turning them into some kind of fast zombie."

"Ghouls," Dawn said. "That will be people without magic that he's transformed. They're already dead and we can't do anything for them now but give them peace. It's the essence users we need to concern ourselves with. If he takes them alive, he can turn them."

"I fought a monster called a blood weaver," Jason said. "It vamped people up but they could be cleansed if you got to them quickly enough."

"Lesser vampires," Dawn said. "You will be able to do the same here. The curse can warp the body and mind but not the soul, unless the soul surrenders to it. If you can get to them before the curse fully claims the body, they can be saved. Once their bodies have gone from living to undead, we can only put them down with the ghouls."

"How long do we have?" Jason asked.

"Hours," Dawn said. "If we act now, we should comfortably be in time. You just have to avoid getting killed while you work, but at least the curse will negate their essence abilities. You go through the building, finding and cleansing the lesser vampires. You will likely have to fight through ghouls and the Cabal to do it."

"We go after the head vampire," Farrah said.

"Yes," Dawn agreed. "I'm confident that I can outfight it but even with fire powers to impede its healing I can't deal enough damage to kill a gold-ranker. That will be your job, Farrah. I'll set up the strikes and you hit with maximum efficiency."

"Alright," Farrah said.

The trio moved to the edge of the roof and surveyed the area. The military and police cordon was keeping people away, while the street in front of the building was strewn with blood and destroyed cars. There were only a handful of bodies, the ones too damaged to be worth turning into ghouls. There were holes in the building's glass exterior. As for the inside of the building, both Dawn and Jason had aura senses powerful enough to examine the interior.

"Ghouls and the Cabal have the first three floors and most of the fourth," Jason said. "It looks like the Network is moving its people to the upper floors where they have magical defences in place."

"There's an armoury on level nine," Farrah said, knowing the building much better than Jason. "They'll set up their first proper defensive line there."

"Then that's where I'll go," Jason said. "I'll start at the bottom and make my way up. They're using the ghouls as meat shields so I can hopefully catch the vamp minions from behind."

"We'll go straight for the old vampire," Dawn said. "The Network will fare better if we can keep him out of the fight."

"The aura those ghouls are throwing off is very feral," Jason said. "The vampire has enough control to stop the ghouls going after the Cabal?"

"From how quickly he created them all," Dawn said, "he is likely from a bloodline that specialises in creating servitors. That is good for us because that kind of bloodline is weaker in direct confrontations."

"How would I do against one of these vampires?" Jason asked.

"Your blood abilities won't be as effective on a gold rank one as those of your rank and lower," Dawn said. "Your powers that impair resistances and ignore rank disparity means your blood magic will still be an advantage but don't underestimate the vampire. Their attributes are similar to an essence user of their rank and they all have different blood powers, based on their vampiric bloodlines."

"How would you rate my chances?" Jason asked.

"If you used a vampire's minions to grow stronger before confronting a solitary vampire, you would most likely win. Without enhancing yourself, or against numbers, I would be far less optimistic."

"So I need to pick my battles," Jason said. "That's nothing new."

Jason had several means of stealing the strength of his enemies. He was able to stack health through various drain powers and if he had enough dead enemies he could compensate for the most dangerous disparity with gold-rankers, which was speed.

Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (04%).

- Effect (iron): Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.

- Effect (bronze): Affects any number of bodies in a wide area.

- Effect (silver): Gain an instance of [Blood Frenzy] for each corpse drained, up to a threshold determined by current rank. After reaching the threshold, gain instances of [Blood of the Immortal] instead.

- [Blood Frenzy] (boon, unholy, stacking): Bonus to [Speed] and [Recovery]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.

- [Blood of the Immortal] (boon, healing, unholy, stacking): On suffering damage, an instance is consumed to grant a powerful but short-lived heal-over-time effect. Additional instances can be accumulated but do not have a cumulative effect.

From the beginning, Blood Harvest had been Jason's strongest recovery power, used to replenish himself after defeating enemies. Now it had a new purpose as a trump card for facing higher-rank foes. If he had the chance to eliminate enough lower-rank enemies first, he could compensate for a gold-ranker's speed by enhancing his own. He still wouldn't be able to match a gold-ranker, at least until he was much further into silver rank himself, but it would be enough to keep him from being wildly outclassed.

Jason, Farrah and Dawn leapt off the edge of the building, each sprouting wings. Jason, in the middle, had wings of night formed from the cloak he conjured around himself. To each side of him were women with wings of fire, gliding in formation towards the Network building.

Chapter 399

Comely Wenches

Jason, Farrah and Dawn were gliding through the air towards the Network building. Twenty dark forms emerged from Jason, heading towards the bottom half of the Building. Shade couldn't easily penetrate the magically protected upper floors but his incorporeal form could easily scout out the rest. Once Shade had bodies all over the building, Jason could easily shadow jump to any of them.

The vampires had naturally good aura control, if somewhat limited in scope, with Jason himself having learned some tricks from Craig Vermillion. The ancient vampire was projecting his aura strongly, flooding the building with fear and dread. It made him easy to find but he also sensed the approach of Jason and the others as they fended off his aura. Farrah needed to expend more effort than Jason and Dawn but still managed to resist the oppressive effects of the vampire's aura.

Jason headed for the ground while Dawn and Farrah went for the third floor. As they split up, Farrah used one of her powers on Jason.

-
- [Farrah Hurin] is attempting to use ability [Power Bond] on you.
 - [Power Bond] will enhance some of your abilities for the duration of the bond and give [Farrah Hurin] access to your knowledge. This is restricted to your knowledge of concepts external to yourself. This ability cannot read your thoughts or access your knowledge of yourself.
 - [Power Bond] can be rejected or ended at any time by you.
 - If you do not implicitly trust [Farrah Hurin], this ability will fail. Subconscious distrust will prevent this power from working.
-

Jason accepted the power.

-
- You have been affected by [Power Bond], connecting you to [Farrah Hurin]. You may end this connection at any time.
 - [Power Bond] has used a random essence from [Farrah Hurin] to enhance one of your abilities at random. Ability [Sanguine Horror] has been enhanced by [Fire Essence]. While [Power Bond] is in effect, familiar [Colin] will be immune to fire and heat effects and inflict [Burning] when making attacks.
-

“Oh,” Jason said, his dark hood hiding the wide grin on his face. “Oh dear me.”

Jason didn't bother to hide as he alighted on the ground outside the building, a half-dozen more Shades emerging from his shadow. There was a small group of Cabal members standing outside the door, none of them hiding their true forms. One was a cyclops, twice the height of a man, while the others looked like stretched-out humans with long, narrow limbs. The cyclops was silver-rank, while the others were bronze.

When they noticed Jason's arrival, the Cabal members didn't move to attack. The long-limbed ones were fearful while the cyclops was angry, all of which Jason could read from their auras.

"Out and proud; I have to respect that," Jason said, looking up at the cyclops. "You're pretty awesome."

"Why are you here?" one of the Cabal members asked. "The Network betrayed you."

"That's why I put my trust in people and not institutions," Jason said. "I still have friends here and I'm not going to let your new boss eat them. Are you really okay with what's happening here?"

"Power always wins," the cyclops growls in a voice of rumbling thunder. "I want to test your power."

"I'm sure you do," Jason said, pushing the hood back off his head. "Once you have, though, you'll wish you hadn't. If the Cabal is willing to pack up and go home, I'm willing to let it."

The cyclops threw back its head to let out a booming laugh.

"You think you can kill us all?"

"Yes," Jason said.

"We never wanted to be part of this," one of the long-limbed Cabal members said. "You don't know how strong the vampire is. Can't you feel it?"

For all his aura's strength, Jason didn't have the power to suppress the vampire's gold-rank aura. His was too strong for the vampire to suppress in turn, even if it could. Only certain bloodlines possessed that aspect of aura control.

"I can feel it," Jason said.

He sent his own aura flooding over the building, overlaying it with that of the vampire. The domineering aspect of Jason's aura competed with the fear-drenched aura of the vampire. It wasn't exactly a positive sensation but Jason's aura did include protective aspects. The Network members in the building were given a sense of being shielded from a monster by a tyrant as Jason alleviated the vampire's oppressive force.

The long-limbed Cabal members were looking at Jason with even more fear than before. The vampire hadn't spared his own people from the effect of his aura, so now they

were suffering both his and Jason's simultaneously. The results were purely psychological but they were effective nonetheless.

"I have a thing about people turning victims into the undead and me having to put them all down," Jason said. "If anyone but the old vampire and his ghouls choose to run, I won't chase. Go inside and tell your people."

"Don't you dare," the cyclops warned, sensing the fear from his minions. He had willpower to spare, impressively unintimidated by either aura.

"I don't want to get caught up in the middle of this," the long-limbed man complained. "Are you seriously alright with killing all these people?"

A beam of light shot from the cyclops' eye like a laser and the long-limbed man screamed as his flesh burned.

"Yes," the cyclops growled as the man tried to run but the beam tracked him until he fell dead to the ground.

Jason tucked his hood back over his head and wrapped his cloak around himself as identical cloaks manifested on the half-dozen Shades standing with him. Moving fast, it would be hard to tell them apart from Jason, especially with Jason's aura washing over them all.

Farrah's sword whip lashed out to shatter the glass, allowing her and Dawn to fly into the third floor unimpeded, where they sensed the source of the vampire's aura. Unlike Jason, the vampire lacked the control to hide his location in an area flooded by his aura, instead, standing out like a beacon.

Dawn and Farrah touched down in a wide hallway full of ghouls. Farrah stomped the floor and a wall of obsidian rose up to bisect the hallway lengthways, swiftly enough to crush several ghouls into the ceiling. The wall then exploded into shards, shredding the remaining ghouls into bloody chunks and the hallway fell silent.

The door at the far end of the hallway opened and a man entered, unfazed by the bloody horror Farrah had made of the hallway. Looking like he stepped out of a period drama rather than the next room, he gazed at the women with a self-satisfied sneer.

"Finally something in this wretched modern world I can wholeheartedly approve of," Willoughby said. "A pair of comely wenches delivering themselves unto me."

"I don't think you're going to like what we're here for," Farrah said.

"I think I might," Willoughby said. "Women are no fun unless they struggle."

"I'm going to enjoy killing you," Farrah said.

"I'm going to enjoy teaching you to use that sharp tongue for... better purposes."

Farrah conjured her obsidian armour around herself as Willoughby dashed forward with the lightning speed of a gold-ranker, practically teleporting down the hallway. Almost instantaneous was not actually instantaneous, however, and while Farrah and the vampire traded barbs, Dawn had been muttering a spell incantation.

Just before the vampire reached them, magic circles appeared on each wall of the corridor, shooting out a net of flaming threads that Willoughby crashed into like a fly into a spider's web. His momentum was arrested as he was tangled in the burning threads but he immediately started yanking himself free with his gold-rank strength. Farrah didn't waste the chance, though, and her whip-sword snaked out to wind itself around the vampire.

Farrah's sword, when unextended, was a jagged-edge greatsword made from obsidian. In its whip-sword state, the obsidian teeth separated and were strung along a flexible cord of red-hot lava, like shark teeth on a necklace. The lava joined the flaming threads of Dawn's trap spell in burning the vampire but the damage was superficial. Willoughby strained against the sword wrapped around him and Farrah didn't leave it in place, knowing he would quickly burst the conjured weapon. Its flexibility and power were incredible but its durability was its weak point.

When Farrah retracted her sword, the obsidian razors chewed up the vampire as if he was caught in an industrial accident. He rapidly healed, although the burnt portions of his flesh recovered more slowly. His regeneration was impeded as flames lit up from the corkscrew wounds left by Farrah's sword.

Dawn had been casting a second spell as Farrah clashed with the vampire and steel rings appeared around Willoughby as he recovered. They immediately warped as the vampire flexed but it bought time for the women to make more attacks. Farrah stomped the floor and an obsidian spike drove up through the floor, piercing through the vampire's crotch to impale him. Obsidian spikes then stabbed out of his body.

It was one of Farrah's most powerful attacks, while also being very efficient in terms of mana cost to damage. The problem was that it was an easy attack to read and avoid, so it saw little use. Only when the enemy was large and slow or caught up by another ability was it useful, which made Dawn a valuable partner for Farrah.

Despite the power of the attack, it barely impeded the vampire. There was a sharp crack of stone from inside the vampire's body as he once more moved to the attack and the impaling shaft was broken. Farrah stood strong against the gold ranker, fighting back as best she could. The speed difference was on full display as her sword hit nothing but air while his clawed nails tore strips off her obsidian armour.

Farrah was not Willoughby's primary objective, however, as he had identified Dawn's control effects as his primary impediment to killing them. The vampire kicked Farrah square in the chest, sending her flying back past Dawn and out through the hole through which she had entered the building, falling out of sight.

Dawn targeted Willoughby's brief moment of imbalance after the lunging kick, seizing the chance to step forward and place her hand against the vampire's chest. All the fire in the room, from the remnants of Dawn's flaming threads to the burning effects Farrah left behind on Willoughby's body vanished. Immediately after, an explosion under Dawn's hand sent the vampire hurtling back down the hallway. She followed up with a rapid series of rising hand gestures, each one causing a wall of flames to rise up one after another, blocking the path between themselves and Willoughby.

Farrah flew back into the building, moving faster for having dismissed her damaged armour. Her flaming wings vanished and she conjured up a fresh set of armour.

"It's going well," she said, eyeing the flaming barriers sealing the hallway.

"It's far from over," Dawn warned.

Dawn was a control specialist, able to do some damage but nowhere near enough to kill a gold-ranker. Unfortunately, her silver-rank control effects only lasted moments against gold-ranker and the most she could do was buy critical moments for Farrah to land her attacks. Even so, Dawn's precision and judgement had allowed her and Farrah to largely control the opening stages of the fight, although the vampire's gold-rank power meant that everything could change in a moment.

Rather than rush through the sequence of flame walls blocking the corridor, Willoughby leveraged the advantage of his gold-rank physicality to smash through the walls of the adjoining rooms, which Farrah and Dawn heard as a rapid series of crashes. The vampire smashed his way back into the hallway, grabbed Farrah and kept going, battering her right through the opposite wall. Lifting her into the air by the neck, he slammed her into the floor so hard that they crashed through it, dropping to the level below.

Kneeling on top of Farrah, Willoughby looked around at what should have been a small army of ghouls. Instead, the ghouls were once more unmoving corpses, withered and dry as if they'd been dead for months.

His attention was drawn back to Farrah as she punched him in the ear. He pinned her arms under his knees and grabbed the face of her helmet, the obsidian cracking as he broke the faceplate right off. He raised a clawed hand to bring it down on her face when a flaming rope from the hole above wrapped around it. More ropes snaked around his other

limbs and he was yanked through the hole and pulled up to the ceiling where the ropes were anchored. He was bound for only a brief moment before quickly breaking free.

In the moment he was tangled up, Farrah was still lying on the floor below but sent a stream of obsidian shards up to bury themselves in the vampire's body. They joined the broken shards still in his body from his earlier impalement, but like that attack, the obsidian did not noticeably impede him. He dashed at Dawn, who calmly evaded his attacks.

Unlike Farrah, who was at the beginning of silver rank, Dawn's avatar was closer to the peak. This meant that while her speed was no match for the gold-ranker, she was far better off than Farrah. The experience-born expertise of a diamond-rank essence user was enough to make up the difference with a vampire attacking like a feral beast, wildly swinging at her with clawed hands.

While he was unable to hit her, he was so fast and so ferocious that Dawn could do nothing but avoid attacks. Farrah leapt up from the floor below to attack the vampire from behind but was intercepted. As she arrived behind him, Willoughby snarled and blood spurted from his back, shredding his clothes. Rather than splatter over Farrah, it coalesced into a blood clone between her and the vampire. It looked identical to Willoughby except for its purple-red bruise colouration, reminiscent of Colin's silver-rank form mimicking Jason.

Both Dawn and Farrah sensed through the vampire's aura that creating the clone had cost him considerable power. As Dawn predicted, most of Willoughby's powers were related to creating minions, with little in the way of combat power. He had seen Farrah demonstrate that using ghouls was little use, while his freshly made lesser vampires had been blinked out of his senses steadily during the fight. It was a concerning development but one he could not turn his attention to as he fought the two women.

Willoughby needed to distract one of the women long enough to kill the other as their double-team tactics were proving too effective. The blood clone was Willoughby's last resort, the creation which consumed a huge portion of his accumulated life force. Once he defeated the women he would need to feed on them to completion instead of turning them into lesser vampires. Even then, he would need blood infused with reality core energy as soon as possible.

Unfortunately for Willoughby, a vampire's handful of powers paled compared to those available to an essence user. Farrah had a last resort of her own and, sensing Willoughby expend a huge portion of his power, slipped a gold spirit coin into her mouth. Her Limit Breaker power would greatly extend the time she could use the spirit coin boost to her attributes and the vampire swore as he sensed Farrah's aura grow sharply in strength.

When Farrah used her Limit Breaker ability to confront a gold-rank essence user, she had still been outmatched. This was not the case against a gold-rank vampire, let alone a blood clone that was an inferior duplicate. As she tore through it, Willoughby realised he was not going to win and tried to flee, dashing past Dawn and aiming for the hole in the exterior wall.

Free of the vampire's attacks, however, Dawn was once again free to use her powers and a web of steel-like thread filled the gap. The vampire crashed into them, trying to force his way through but they slowed him as Dawn cast a spell and more flaming ropes emerged from the floor, wrapped around the vampire and dragged him back inside.

After that, it was just a matter of time as Dawn continued to impede both the vampire and the clone as Farrah lay into them with power fuelled by the spirit coin she consumed. As a finisher, she transformed the many obsidian fragments she had left in his body into lava, burning him from the inside out. In the end, the vampire was left as a burned wreck, bound to the floor by conjured steel wires it no longer had the strength to break.

"Don't kill it," Dawn said. "Wait for Asano. There's something I want to test."

Chapter 400

A Lot Like a Guess

Jason stood in front of the Network building, the cyclops and other Cabal members still standing in front of him. The air stank of burned flesh from the one that had tried to flee and was slain by the cyclops for making the attempt, leaving a dozen more. Jason stood flanked by Shades as he squared-off with the people in front of him.

The cyclops fired its eyebeam at Jason and one of the orbs turned into a shield to intercept it. The powerful beam swiftly annihilated the barrier but the momentary delay was enough for Jason to step into one of the Shades and vanish.

The other Cabal members took the chance to scatter as the cyclops was focused on Jason, some dashing into the building while others ran into the streets or even started Spider-Manning their way up the side of the building. The cyclops panned its eye over the space in front of the building for Jason, blasting beams at the Shades and eliminating two of them before the rest vanished into shadows.

Jason rose up from the cyclops' own shadow, between it and the building and immediately made a series of sewing needle dagger strikes into the towering creature's thigh while swiftly chanting spells.

"Bleed for me."

"Carry the mark of your transgressions."

"Your fate is to suffer."

The cyclops didn't enjoy the balanced attributes of an essence user, with speed being the price for its size and strength. It was fast for its size but still a brute, all power and no finesse. This made it easy pickings for Jason as he locked in his full suite of afflictions.

At silver rank, Jason's affliction array was more terrible than ever. Not only was he able to bypass immunities that had previously stifled him, but he also had more damage effects than ever. His special attack, Punish, had been one of his bread and butter powers from the beginning and continued to be a core technique.

Ability: [Punish] (Sin)

- Special attack (melee, curse, holy).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (07%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage and the [Sin] affliction.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Price of Absolution].
 -
 - Effect (silver): If the target has any instances of [Sin] they suffer an instance of the [Wages of Sin] affliction. If the enemy struck has no instances of [Sin] but does have instances of [Penance], they do not suffer [Sin] or [Wages of Sin]. They instead suffer transcendent damage from this ability in place of necrotic damage and suffer an additional instance of [Penance] and instances of [Penance] do not drop off for a short period.

 - [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

 - [Price of Absolution] (affliction, holy): Suffer transcendent damage for each instance of [Sin] cleansed from you.
 -
 - [Wages of Sin] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Suffer necrotic damage over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 -
 - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
-

Punish was representative of the way Jason fought at his current rank. In the early stages of a fight, it added more necrotic damage than ever. Once Jason had cleansed an enemy, replacing the necrotic afflictions with the transcendent damage penance affliction, the special attack changed to support it.

The cyclops reacted to Jason's attacks, wheeling in place, but his size was an impediment when Jason stayed close. He kicked at Jason, who easily dodged, and tried to back off to leverage his eyebeam. Jason stayed underfoot, frustrating the monoptical giant.

One of Jason's orbs had been destroyed by the first eyebeam attack but the other one was still floating around him. It moved over to the cyclops and vanished as it applied the affliction that caused the cyclops to start spawning butterflies.

-
- [Harbinger of Doom] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Continually drain mana from the victim to conjure a butterfly that seeks out nearby enemies. The butterflies are incorporeal and deal disruptive-force damage in a small area when destroyed. Butterflies that contact enemies inflict one instance of each non-holy affliction present on the enemy it manifested from, including [Harbinger of Doom]. This effect cannot be cleansed while any other non-holy affliction is in effect. Additional instances can be accumulated. At the time of manifestation, one butterfly is generated for each instance of this affliction.
-

“Gordon,” Jason said and his familiar appeared. Four orbs manifested around Gordon instead of the usual six, with the two Jason had expended not yet recovered. Four was sufficient for Jason’s needs, however.

“Open it up,” Jason ordered.

One of the advancements Gordon had made at silver-rank was the ability to use any of his abilities via one type of orb, instead of having different orbs with individual functions. This meant that Gordon could use all four orbs to fire resonating-force beams at the building. Resonating-force was a damage type with superior armour-penetrating qualities and tore through non-magical concrete as easily as glass, opening the entire front of the building up as it threw out a cloud of concrete dust, obscuring Jason from the cyclops.

Inside the building, most of the Cabal forces were gathered on the ground floor as the ghouls forced their way up. The Cabal members had already become aware of the events outside after some of the long-limbed people fled inside, and now the wall was stripped away by energy beams that passed right through it and swept over them as well. They rushed outside even as Gordon vanished back into Jason’s aura and Jason sank into the cyclops’ shadow. In the meantime, butterflies moved from the cyclops in the direction of the emerging crowd.

Jason emerged from one of Shade's bodies on the second floor, in a small janitorial storage room. On the other side of the closed door, he could hear ghouls rushing about.

“Gordon, if any of the people outside decide to run for it, have the butterflies leave them alone,” Jason said. One of Gordon’s orbs briefly glowed a brighter blue, signalling his acknowledgement.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “Some Cabal members are climbing the exterior of the building and may circumvent the Network defenders to reach the people who have yet to reach the upper-floor magical defences.”

“Many of them?”

"Only a few on each side of the building, all iron or bronze-rank. Some are less interested in breaching the building as much as escaping the fight between you and the cyclops. I recommend deploying Gordon."

“How cool was that cyclops?” Jason asked. “That eyebeam?”

“I think, perhaps, you should try and maintain focus, Mr Asano.”

“What do you say, Gordon? Want to play window washer?”

Gordon flashed a blue orb and passed right through the wall.

“What’s the situation?” Jason asked.

"The gold-rank vampire seems to have scattered his new lesser vampires amongst the ghouls," Shade explained, having scouted the building as Jason confronted the cyclops. "The vampire's ability to directly control this many ghouls appears to be limited. I believe the lesser vampires are acting as sub-commanders to keep the horde under control."

"What am I dealing with on the other side of this door?"

"A number of ghouls led by one of the lesser vampires tried to ascend the stairs nearby but the stairs collapsed on them. They are forming a pile and climbing up over one another. The lesser vampire is someone I recognised from a network tactical team. We've worked with him in the past."

"Let's go save him, then," Jason said. "I'm just sorry we can't do anything for the rest of them."

Jason opened the door and stepped out into an open office space full of toppled cubicle walls teeming with ghouls. Only the closest ones noticed Jason's arrival until he raised his arm, palm outward, and strafed the room with leeches that erupted from his hand.

This quickly drew the attention of the lesser vampire, easy to pick out for not being a twisted, animate corpse. The vampire dashed through the ghouls as Jason raised his other hand in his direction.

"Feed me your sins."

Nigel's tactical section checked the bodies of the long-limbed creatures sprawled on the stairs to confirm they were dead.

"What are these things?" Woolzy wondered out loud. "I thought the Cabal were all myths and fairy tales and such. What's this meant to be? Once upon a time, Stretch Armstrong turned out to be kind of a prick?"

"Is anyone else feeling that aura?" Darce asked. "It dropped down on us just as we started shooting."

"Yeah," Nigel said. "Asano is here."

"You don't suppose he's chucked in with the Cabal, do you?" Woolzy asked. "I heard he was friendly with one of their vamps and we did kill his brother. And his girlfriend."

"That was the Seppos and their bloody cat-four bloke, not us," Orange said.

"Are you willing to bet your life on him making that distinction?" Digit asked.

"If Asano was against us, his aura would feel a lot worse than arrogant," Nigel said.

"Jonno, Thorny, check the exterior for more of those things."

They had shattered the glass wall attacking the things climbing up the outside. Thorny gripped Jonno's arm as he leaned out to check the exterior, only to duck back in. One of the creatures fell past the window, almost taking him with it. He poked his head out again out, looking up to see a floating entity attacking the creatures clinging to the wall with energy beams.

"Asano's here, alright," he said. "I don't think we have to worry about the climbers."

Shade had scouted out each of the lesser vampires, which meant that Jason could jump directly to them. The problem was that after cleaning them he was left with a weakened, confused and vulnerable essence user, right in the midst of the enemy. He missed the presence of Kaito, who would have allowed him to throw them right out a window to be extracted by helicopter. He started locking them into storage cupboards, copy rooms and any other place he could find not overrun with ghouls.

The only place in the building Jason avoided was the section of the third floor where he could sense Farrah, Dawn and the vampire. The ghouls were pushing further and further up the building, with Jason appearing and disappearing as he needed. On the eighth floor, he encountered some of the Network defenders, helping Koen Waters secure a stairwell being overrun with ghouls. Colin started at the top of the stairs and began devouring his way down, enhanced by the flame power he received from Farrah.

Once Gordon returned, Jason had him use his resonating-force beams to bore a hole in the floor from the eighth floor all the way down to the ground. The butterflies that had multiplied on the Cabal members of the ground floor used the hole to start flooding up through the building, going to work on the ghouls.

Jason arrived at the spot where Dawn and Farrah had what was left of the vampire. Farrah had called him over through the party chat but he hadn't arrived until most of the ghouls were cleared out. Once the Network teams could move back down and retrieve their formerly-vampiric companions he had stashed around the building, Jason sought out Farrah and Dawn.

"Why haven't you finished this guy off?" Jason asked after they exchanged stories. "If you think keeping him alive because he might be useful later is a good idea, you need to watch more movies."

"A vampire is not alive," Dawn said. "Its body is a vessel for stolen life force."

"Okay," Jason said.

“This vampire’s stolen life force is infused with reality core energy. I suspect that if you drain the life force from vampires, you may be able to absorb that energy yourself, accelerating the advancement of your abilities.”

“Hold up,” Jason said. “You mean I can use this vampire like a monster core?”

“Very broadly speaking,” Dawn said. “I’m not entirely certain it will work but if it does, it will only be with vampires, who do not truly own the life force they contain.”

“I don’t want to do that. Monster cores mess up your ability to advance without using more monster cores.”

“Reality cores have the same effect,” Dawn said, “albeit to a lesser degree. In this instance, however, the vampires serve as a method of refining the energy. Their bodies should have already soaked up the elements that stain the soul and impede non-core advancement, like filters.”

“Should have?” Jason asked. “That sounds a lot like a guess. You did just say the words ‘I’m not entirely certain,’ which do not fill me with confidence.”

“There is a very good chance that there are more of these vampires than anyone realises,” Dawn said, “and very few of them will be as weak as this one. If you can get even a little stronger, that may prove critical going forward.”

“No,” Farrah said. “It’s not worth risking your entire future over. Will he advance any faster than if he were using cores?”

“Almost certainly not,” Dawn said.

“Then why bother?” Farrah asked. “Advancing through silver-rank takes years. Eating a few vampires won’t make a big difference.”

“It does not have to be a big difference to be important,” Dawn said. “You are both still at the early stages of silver-rank, where your growth is at its fastest. Asano’s abilities are strong against vampires. Advancing them even a little will be to our advantage.”

“It’s easy to tell someone else to cripple their potential when you’re already diamond rank,” Farrah said.

“That’s enough,” Jason said. As the two women argued, his gaze hadn’t left the scorched, helpless vampire.

“Yes, Dawn’s asking me to take a crappy risk, but we all know what’s at stake. What’s the worst that can happen? I have to rank up using cores from now on? I’ll trade that for keeping the world safe.”

“You don’t even know if we need to go around fighting vampires,” Farrah argued.

“Even if there are a bunch of them out there, how does that affect our objectives?”

"Perhaps, not at all," Dawn said. "So long as you can convince Jason to not help people when there's an uprising of gold-rank vampires going on, we may not have an issue. Of course, if they learn about the door and its ability to access reality cores, they may come after us."

"It's my choice," Jason said, holding his hand over the vampire.

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

The life drain power was enough to finish the vampire.

-
- You have absorbed refined reality energy. It will be applied to advance your least developed abilities. The purified nature of the energy will not impede your ability to advance through non-energy absorption methods.
 -
 - You have absorbed insufficient energy to advance any of your abilities.
-

Jason's tense shoulders slumped with relief.

"All good," he said. "Looks like I might want to hunt some vampires, if I get the chance."

"See?" Dawn said to Farrah. "I told you it would be fine."

"And I bet the odds looked great when you weren't the one taking the risk."

"What's done is done," Jason said. "It was my choice and it worked out, so there's no point arguing."

"You shouldn't have let her pressure you into it."

Jason laughed as he gave Farrah a reassuring smile.

"Do you think that she's enough to force me into a choice I don't want to make?" he asked. "If I can stand up to the Builder and I can stand up to the goddess of Knowledge, I can stand up to her."

Farrah frowned but gave a reluctant nod.

"Alright," Jason said turning back to the vampire. "Let's see if I can shake the last bit of sauce out of the bottle."

He held his hand out and cast another spell.

"As your life was mine to reap, so your death is mine to harvest."

The remnant life force within the vampire was drawn out and absorbed.

-
- You have absorbed refined reality energy. It will be applied to advance your least developed abilities.
 - Ability [Verdict] had advanced from Silver 0 (93%) to Silver 0 (94%).
-

“Huh,” Jason said. “I think I’ll need to kill a lot of vampires.”