

## Chapter 421

### No Perfect Options

Jason was resting up before moving to claim one final territory. He was not far from the house containing the family he had rescued but he was giving them space to come to grips with their extraordinary circumstances. He was in the backyard of a nearby house, reclining in a cloud chair. The sky was a clear blue circle over his territory, encapsulated in a ring of endless night.

“There is something of a resemblance to your personal crest,” Shade observed.

“It kind of does,” Jason said, holding a hand out, palm up. An image of the crest tattooed on his back appeared over it. It was a night sky filled with stars and shadowy, indistinct figures, surrounding an empty cloak. Within the cloak was a bright, daylight sky.

As essence users entered the higher ranks, they reached the point of affecting the world around them outside of their essence powers. At silver-rank, this was mostly just a power to levitate that helped their increasingly heavy bodies walk on weaker surfaces or even water, but it was easily disrupted. Relying on it in combat or to arrest a high fall was ill-advised.

Those silver-rankers with a magically-induced personal crest could also project it, which had even less practical purpose. It did not obviate the need for the simple ritual that tested the crest against existing records for identification purposes.

Jason closed his hand and the image vanished.

“I should get to it, I guess,” he said. “I’m worried about what will happen. Maybe I should open it up and get some gold-rankers in here. Maybe they could do more.”

“Or perhaps the corresponding increase in response from the transformation zone would bring disaster,” Shade countered. “It would match their power, escalating the threat without tipping the balance in your favour.”

“I know. I’m just second-guessing myself.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“I’m not so certain. The price of my failure here is higher than ever and I’ve made mistakes before.”

“You’re adventurer, Mr Asano. Get up and go do your damn job.”

Jason sat up, giving his shadow a surprised look.

“That’s not like you, Shade.”

“It’s what you needed to hear, Mr Asano. Left to your own devices, you tend to flounder. You lose direction, becoming uncertain and second-guessing yourself. I do my best but I am glad Miss Farrah was sent to help.”

“Yeah, I owe your dad for that one.”

Jason got to his feet and the cloud chair dissolved into mist, which seemed to be drifting down his body to gather around his feet, like a fog-based water feature.

“I should talk to the family about leaving first. Give them time to prepare themselves for what happens next.”

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“Are your underpants on fire?” Nikoleta asked as she met him in the front yard of the house her family was staying in.

“No,” Jason said and the mist shroud he hadn’t bothered to dismiss was drawn to the miniaturised flask hanging from his neck chain. “We should talk.”

“It would be best if it were just you and I again,” Nikoleta said. “My grandparents are very religious and they’ve seen and heard things about you that make them wary.”

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “Shall we walk?”

They set off along the street, down a footpath of lightly-coloured tiles.

“What happened to your eyes?” she asked.

“Um, I don’t know. Shade?”

“Your eyes have changed again with your gift evolution,” Shade said from Jason’s shadow. Nikoleta looked around a little nervously at the voice.

“I quite liked the silver,” Jason said. “What is it now?”

“A shifting mix of gold, silver and blue. It is reminiscent of your transcendent damage abilities.”

“Shifting?” he asked.

“The colours are in a constant state of change,” Shade said. “Also, the structure of your eye had changed. You no longer have irises or pupils. They are just coloured orbs, now.”

That wasn’t hugely startling, given that the eyes of essence users were one of the first aspects of their bodies to move past human limitations. As a result, eyes were the most common part of the body on essence users to undergo visible physiological changes.

“Does it look cool?” Jason asked.

“I think it would be better if they were black,” Shade said.

“Look who I’m asking. Nikoleta, what do you think?”

They shared a look as she examined his face.

“It makes you look a bit... inhuman,” she said, then self-consciously touched her face next to her own eyes. “Not that I can say anything.”

All of her family now had eyes and hair in a uniform shade of metallic brass, although the texture of their hair felt normal.

“I’m sorry,” Jason said softly. “With the life I lead, it’s easy to overlook how overwhelming all this is when you first come to it. You have many strange things to come to terms with and it’s only been a day. Did you sleep?”

Nikoleta nodded.

“After the initial shock wore off, we all became very exhausted. And those beds are so comfortable.”

“Yeah,” Jason said with a chuckle. “They’re nice.”

He gave her a comforting smile.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but I’m afraid your family’s ordeal isn’t done quite yet. I’m going to go off and claim another area of territory, see if I can’t find any more people like your family. Then I’m going to bring all this to an end and take us out of here.”

“What happens then?” she asked.

“I honestly don’t know,” Jason admitted. “As far as I know, what’s going on here has never happened before. I’m just doing my best to save the world without breaking anything it can’t do without. Right now, we’re inside a giant dome, despite the sky above and all the land stretching out around us. My best guess is that when the dome comes down, this little city, town or whatever it is will stick around and the rest will go.”

“What will happen to us?”

“You see that tower?” Jason said, pointing to the pagoda, the top of which could be seen over the three and four-floor story buildings in the centre of the city. “We’re all going to be safe in there.”

He managed to avoid adding the word ‘probably.’

“I don’t think your farm will be back but that’s far from the extent of your problems. Your family is a part of a unique magical event, which means that a lot of people with power will want to study you.”

“Study?”

“Yeah. Best case scenario, they lock you up in a room somewhere and run every test known to science. Then a few that aren’t.”

“And the worst case?” she asked.

“It’s probably best if we just focus on avoiding that.”

“How?”

“People trying to grab me is pretty much the default position, so I was already going to do a runner. Now, we just all scarper together. Assuming you want to. If you want to take your chances with whoever is out there, I can send you out of this place before I do anything.”

“What about after we run?”

“There’s a couple of options. One is the place my family lives in Australia. Unless very serious people take a very serious run at it, you’ll be safe there. It would be better if we could have you disappear into the population somewhere, but the changes you’ve gone through are hard to hide. The alternative would be to sneak you into a more ordinary transformation zone, one in a populated area. The Network is taking all those people in, so you could mix into the crowd. If you got found out, though, you’d already be in the hands of people you maybe don’t want to be.”

Nikoleta didn’t respond after he finished, staring thoughtfully at the ground as they walked.

“There are no perfect options, I’m sorry.”

“You have already helped us. We are not your responsibility.”

“Yes, you are,” Jason said. “When I was in a situation not that different from yours, I made the choice to be an adventurer. I don’t know how that translates into Slovak but it means that when there’s some crazy-dangerous magic and some innocent people, my job is standing in between it and them.”

“You’re speaking Slovak right now,” Nikoleta pointed out.

“I know, right? I have to practise to keep a handle on the whole translation thing. I was talking to this guy who was looking at me like he had no idea what he was saying. Turns out I got set off by his Kanji wrist tattoo and I was talking to him in Japanese. Which he didn’t speak. He was just kind of a tool bag.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

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Jason left Nikoleta to discuss things with her family and headed out for the next territory. Shade’s helicopter form landed close to the border of Jason’s spirit domain and he looked out into the gloom beyond. It looked like another cityscape, but even from just the darkened silhouettes, he could tell it was quite unlike the one he had already claimed.

He crossed the border and moved into the dark territory. He couldn’t see far but two things became quickly apparent. One was that the city seemed very industrial in design, not just in the metal and concrete construction but the design aesthetic. Metal plates and heavy bolts; he half expected to see a giant steam piston.

The other aspect immediately apparent was that the city was long abandoned. Decades of corrosion and weathering had left the concrete pocked and crumbling, the asphalt potholed and every building a rusted husk.

“Find anything?” Jason asked. Shade had been spreading out his bodies to search the border areas as Jason explored at a measured and cautious pace.

“Nothing more than you,” Shade reported, “but I believe I know the world that this territory was based upon.”

“Seriously? The original Builder based Earth and Pallimustus on already extant worlds but that was the better part of thirteen billion years ago. I know you’re old but not that old, right? Any planet would be massively changed in that time.”

“I know it because it was one of the first worlds the new Builder plundered. It was a dead planet, so the other great astral beings allowed the Builder to break it apart and take what he wanted as part of the pacts by which they moderate one another. The Builder came to regret the concessions it made to the World-Phoenix for this, which is why it has become more circumspect. Now it plucks sufficiently stable astral spaces off the side of reality rather than trying to dig inside a reality and dismember worlds entirely.”

“He used to strip whole worlds?”

“Only dead ones, which turned out to be a poor beginning for his ambitions. When he used parts of dead worlds as the basis for the one he was constructing, it was like implanting dead flesh into living. There was a taint of death, pervading even the magic, forcing the Builder to seal away those parts of his constructed world.”

“Sealed away how?”

“Sealed in time. Not locked away but frozen and unchanging. Anything altered by external influence simply reverts to the state it was at the moment the seal was put in place. A perfect quarantine.”

“I knew time manipulation was possible,” Jason said. “Danielle Geller’s confluence essence is time, but her scope is very limited, even at silver rank. If she gets to diamond, will she be able to time travel?”

“Only forwards,” Shade said. “Time can be sped up or slowed down. One can move forward, vanishing and then reappearing at some point in the future. Affecting the past, however, is impossible. Even the Keeper of Moments, the great astral being that governs time, cannot do such a thing.”

“Well, you say that, but your dad is the ferryman of the dead and he’s not above occasionally sending someone back.”

“It is not so for the Keeper. The past is inviolate.”

“Probably what he told you,” Jason muttered.

“Getting back to the matter at hand,” Shade said pointedly, “I believe it likely that the enemies in this place will consist of constructed life. A variation of undead that, like vampires, use life-force injected into the unliving to create a facsimile of life.”

Most undead were simply corpses turned into a mockery of life by death energy, while vampires used stolen life force to largely replicate the function of a living creature.

“Are we talking some kind of artificial vampire?” Jason asked. “How would an artificial vampire work? Like cloning?”

“I don’t believe it will be vampire variants. I do know that what you call magitech on your world was quite advanced in this one, but my knowledge only goes so far. I was not in the Builder’s constructed reality for an extended time.”

“You’ve been there?”

“I have. As you know, I have been a familiar several times. One of my summoners sought out knowledge from a universe that had reached its end long ago. The only place the knowledge potentially remained was in fragments of the universe taken from it by the Builder quarantined in time.”

“Must have been really important information,” Jason said. “Like a really good sausage recipe.”

“No,” Shade said. “It was not a really good sausage recipe.”

“Oh, wow,” Jason said. “A really, really good sausage recipe. Nice.”

“I believe this conversation has officially scraped the bottom of the barrel,” Shade said. “Perhaps it is time to start expanding your domain.”

“Yeah,” Jason said unhappily. He was worried about the outcome of his final territory claim, given that he didn’t want to risk using his most powerful weapon again. The core launcher had become noticeably warped when fighting the boss of the last territory. He was not willing to risk it blowing up in his hands unless he had no other option.

Returning to the border of his domain, Jason claimed the first stretch of the next territory. As a precaution, he started by using the minimum number of stable genesis cores to claim the minimal area.

As his territory expanded outwards to reveal the broken city, Jason smacked his lips thoughtfully.

“Do you still have that sausage recipe?” he asked.

“It was not a sausage recipe.”

“I could go a good meal right now. I mean, that fruit you picked was nice but I’d rather enjoy taking a sausage in the mouth.”

“Please don’t be juvenile, Mr Asano.”

“You think it’s beneath me to say?”

“No, Mr Asano. It is beneath me to listen.”

## Chapter 422

### Stillness

Jason kicked the zombie cyborg in the chest and it stumbled back off the edge of the roof, falling to the concrete below.

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➤ You have defeated [Unliving Anomaly].

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“I don’t like this place,” Jason said. “It’s too bloody grimdark.”

Somehow, having the gloom retract from the industrial ruins left it bleaker than when it was shrouded in darkness. Jason could now see across a cityscape of crumbling smokestacks and buildings more rust than iron. The sky, unlike the clear blue of his completed territories, was hidden behind ominous amber clouds that cast a pall over the city. The air was too hot, heavy with a stench of smoke and oil, despite the city’s industries being decades past operation.

The anomalies that came for Jason were universally unpleasant. Most common were the corpses animated through macabre cybernetics. Rather than sleek, cyberpunk prosthetics, these were crude iron, bolted directly into flesh. These anomalies were slow and clumsy but numerous and hard to kill. Jason mostly relied on his necrotic special attack to resume the decomposition of their corpse components, arrested by whatever process had turned them into their current state.

With each cluster of the zomborgs, as Jason thought of them, there was usually one or more of another anomaly type. Larger, faster and more dangerous, they were a kind of Frankenstein's monster if Frankenstein's corpse supplier had been significantly less reliable. Collections of mismatched body parts stitched roughly together, they stood anywhere from six and a half to eight feet tall. They showed signs of the same kind of industrial-age cybernetics as the zomborgs, augmented with glass pipes pumping a sickly yellow liquid around their bodies.

These anomalies, which Jason had dubbed ‘bad franks,’ were as strong as they looked but also fast, despite their clumsy appearance. They were also smarter than the mindless zomborgs, although that wasn’t saying much. It just meant it was harder to bait them into walking off buildings or falling into holes.

Jason didn’t use any of his guns to fight the anomalies. He’d tried the lightning gun but it had little impact on the zomborgs and none at all on the bad franks. The minigun he kept in reserve as it was his best tool for whatever boss monster came out at the end.



Groaning metal from below warned of more enemies making their way up through one of the city's least-degraded buildings, which was still an edifice of dilapidation. The steel rooftop looked like it was covered in red dirt from all the rust power under Jason's boots.

Jason had already been tracking them on his tactical map and as they drew close to the building, he waited with his sword in hand. The largely intact rooftop was a good place to fight because the open space allowed for mobility and the powerful-but-stupid enemies could be lured into the places where it had collapsed. If he was lucky and had softened them up first, sometimes the fall even killed them instead of just forcing them to climb back up the stairs.

Their numbers might have been a problem in an open space except for the power he unlocked after defeating the boss of the previous territory. The giant troll had dropped a blood orb that unsealed one of Jason's blood essence powers.

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#### Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain, boon).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Silver 2 (31%).
  
- 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.

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The zomborgs weren't subject to the effect of the spell but the bad franks were. Each time he used it both his body and his healing rate accelerated, and so long as he periodically killed and drained a new bad frank, the buffs kept getting refreshed. By the time blood frenzy stacked up to its maximum effect, Jason's speed and healing reached

the peak of silver. It wasn't a match for even a low-rank gold, but it was enough to be competitive. It wasn't strictly needed against the franks and the zomborgs but when the time came to face ancient vampires, it would be critical.

The zomborgs were a minimal threat, although a tenacious one with their ability to soak damage. Jason moved like a flash, staying out of their reach while his necrotic special attack rotted them away until they were just piles of bones and metal. As for the bad franks, they had strength and fortitude, but no skill. Once Jason matched and then eclipsed their speed, he quickly ran rings around them. They also had exploitable weak points, like the exposed pipes pumping fluid around their bodies.

If he was fighting them one-on-one it would have been easy, but his individual superiority was thoroughly tempered by their numbers. If it wasn't for Shade providing distractions and alternate targets for the dim-witted enemies, he would have been overwhelmed, however fast he moved.

Jason's biggest weakness was his inability to quickly deliver large amounts of damage and he struggled to clear out each cluster of anomalies before the next set found him. He felt like he was back at the beginning, after first arriving in the transformation zone. Fights were desperate struggles with weapons that were not quite good enough, and while he had some powers now, the enemies had grown far more dangerous.

Jason wasn't even sure how many days he'd been in the transformation zone, but in that time, much of the fat had been trimmed from his swordsmanship. On Earth, he'd found moments of desperation but he'd lost some of the grow-or-die sensibility that pervaded the other world. He'd only really felt it in moments, like the monster wave in Broken Hill and the gold-rank proto-space in Makassar. Now he had that feeling again, the transformation zone forcing him to fight differently, forcing him to grow in ways outside of his usual patterns. The price of failure was unconscionable.

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Jason emerged from the building with his armour in tatters and painted in his own blood. The wounds that produced it were long-healed and the ichor of the monsters had gone up in rainbow smoke, but his armour was so damaged that the self-repair function was impaired. He stopped to rest, even though it meant his stacks of blood frenzy dropping off. He could have all the stamina recovery in the world but some kinds of exhaustion went soul deep. Leaning heavily against a half-collapsed wall, he wiped down his sword with a rag and slid it back into its scabbard.

Tired and sore, Jason felt weary down to the skeleton that probably wasn't made of bone anymore. He could sense more of the anomalies but none were moving in his

direction for the moment, giving him room to rest and think. Something about the rooftop fight had felt wrong and it wasn't just his lack of powers. His mind played over the fight he had just been through as the anomalies came at him in waves. He'd let himself grow frantic, too concerned with the capabilities lost to him to properly make use of the ones he had.

He needed to go back to basics. To use what he had instead of lamenting what he didn't. He thought about the early days and his training with Rufus, Gary and Farrah. For all their constant drilling, they never focused on his essence powers, leaving them to Jason to understand for himself. What they had taught him were the universal aspects true to every adventurer. Whatever an adventurer's powers might be, their greatest weapon was mindset.

"Thank you," he murmured, pushing himself off the wall.

"Mr Asano?" Shade asked.

"I'm going to stop for a little while," Jason said.

"Very well, Mr Asano."

Jason went back into the building and climbed the metal stairs that groaned with every step. He moved to the middle of the roof and sat down to meditate, floating just above the powered rust coating the rooftop.

Extending his senses as he stilled his mind, Jason felt the magic inside and around him. Starting with himself, he calmed the flow of magic in his body, guiding it to the optimal path. Then he moved his senses to the magic around him.

The ambient magic was much stronger than anything he had encountered on Earth, or even in Greenstone in the other world. Only proto and astral spaces, with their connection to the astral, had the kind of magical richness of the transformation zone. This part of the zone felt inert and tainted, however. The death and decay of the city had permeated the magic itself.

As it flowed in and out of his body like breath, he filtered and refined it, using his body as a distillery. The unwelcome aspects were purged while the purified magic was absorbed, circulated and let go. Slowly but surely, a tiny but noticeable area, barely beyond Jason's skin, became a shroud of untainted magic.

Letting his spirit go where it willed in the mindlessness of meditation, Jason's aura took root in that thin shroud, seeking to influence the world around it. As it did, the very reality around him flinched, crushing in on Jason in a brutal magical backlash.

Wrenched from his trance, Jason poured every scrap of strength in his soul into his aura as he fell to the roof, clutching his head and screaming. His aura pushed back

against the power crushing in on him but it was an umbrella against a tidal wave. A hurricane of power was trying to rip the soul right out of his body and kill him, and all he could do was try and endure.

A torment unlike anything he had felt since his soul battle with the Builder scoured at his spirit, trying to make him let go and die. Jason went into a mindless state, not from meditation but from the insensibility of a pain that went far beyond the physical. At the point he felt his grip slipping, about to let go, Jason felt the support of his familiars from within his soul. Like warm hands at his back, they helped him hold on even as he lost track of time.

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Jason regained consciousness sprawled on the rooftop, with no concept of how long had passed.

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- You have forcibly unsealed aura ability [Hegemony].

New Title: [Reality Hegemon]

- ??? - You have awakened potential your soul cannot sustain at its current rank.
- The maximum total size of your spirit domains has increased.
- The effect of your spirit domain on hostile intruders ignores rank disparity.

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Jason felt like his insides had been scooped out, tossed in a blender with a bunch of chillies and then poured back in. He closed the window, sensing anomalies converging on his position. Whatever just happened, it had gained the notice of every anomaly across the section of the city he had claimed for his domain. He could sense them all moving towards him in a beeline.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said, a rare strain of concern colouring his usually stoic inflection.

“I’ll be fine,” Jason croaked, pushing himself into a sitting position. He floated slightly off the rooftop, stilling his mind once more. He slowly brought the chaotic flow of magic in his body back into line, reordering the flow. It was filled with the taint of the surrounding magic and he began filtering it out. He kept his mind calm, in spite of the anomalies he sensed reaching the building.

“Mr Asano...”

“I know.”

Jason continued to rectify his condition, even as he felt the fast-moving bad franks race up the stairs.

“Mr Asano!”

The first bad frank burst through a doorway already smashed out by previous attackers. Shade had spread bodies out to distract the anomalies pouring up the building in numbers that threatened to collapse the stairs. Shade couldn't hurt the anomalies, but neither could they hurt him, their strikes passing harmlessly through his incorporeal form.

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➤ [Unliving Anomaly] has attacked ally [Shade]. Ability [Hegemony] has inflicted [Sin] on [Unliving anomaly].

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As more bad franks and some zomborgs reached the rooftop, even the dozens of Shades were not enough to keep the anomalies distracted. A bad frank thundered towards Jason, still floating just above the rooftop in a meditative pose. The anomaly dropped an arm like the trunk of a falling tree but missed as Jason dropped to the roof, rolling out of the way and to his feet as his sword snaked out of its scabbard. The blade severed a fluid pipe in the monstrosity's arm and cut into its flesh.

Having already stacked up some of the sin affliction from Jason's awakened aura power, the necrosis from his special attack rotted away the flesh around the wound. It turned into a wet mess like charcoal mixed into custard, sliding from the anomaly's arm to spatter on the ground. The creature took another swing but Jason was already moving.

Jason's unexpected ordeal hadn't made him any faster or stronger. It hadn't caused a sudden qualitative leap in his sword technique. Yet he felt like a different person as he moved amongst the enemy, his mind a leaf floating on a still, deep pond. He did not have the speed boost from bloody frenzy yet he somehow felt faster than ever, his thoughts calm even as his body moved like water, flowing and smooth yet torrential and rapid.

He focused on the first bad frank and it went down. Even while continuing to avoid attacks he cast a spell, draining its life force and giving himself his first stack of blood frenzy.

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Even with his new state of mind, Jason was far from invincible. Once more he leaned against the outside of the building, painted in a fresh coat of his own blood. He was practically naked, his armour reduced to little more than decorative ribbons.

He looked at his hands, rubbing his fingers together, feeling the sensation of it.

“I feel different,” he said.

“You are different, Mr Asano. Before you and I ever met, Mr Remore and Miss Hurin set you on a path towards a certain state of mind. It exists somewhere between concentration and meditation; a paradoxically simultaneous state of empty mind and full attentiveness. It is a state that only essence users, who have surpassed the limitation of the physical brain can enter, although many never do. It has many names; in Miss Hurin’s world it is called the battle trance.”

“Rufus and Farrah never told me about this.”

“No. They set you on the path and let you walk it.”

The more Jason grew stronger, the more he came to understand how many unspoken things Rufus and Farrah had embedded into the training they spent months pouring into him, hour after hour, day after day.

“Rufus and Farrah can do this?”

“Yes. I suspect Mr Remore may be better at it but you have seen Miss Hurin use it yourself. You have observed yourself how she lacks your mobility, yet finds her way to where she needs to be, precisely when she needs to be there. This is how.”

"Dawn fought Akari," Jason said, remembering how Dawn and her normal-ranked body inexplicably out-spurred the silver-ranked swordswoman. "That never made sense. It was weird, as if the whole thing was choreographed or Akari was hypnotised or something."

“Yes. That was a diamond-ranker taking the effect to its absolute extreme. I suggest, now that you have touched on that state, that you discuss it with the two women on returning to them.”

“Assuming I get out of this place intact,” Jason said. “I still have to claim the rest of this territory.”

## Chapter 423

### Whatever We Face

Jason continued to extend his spirit domain over the industrial wasteland city, seeking to master the battle trance as he fought hordes of anomalies. Although he had touched upon the trance once, it was not a state that he easily found his way into. In some fights, he managed it and others not.

"My understanding of the state is limited, having never experienced it for myself," Shade said. "From what I do understand, forcibly trying to push your way into it will have little to no success. One of my previous summoners who could use the battle trance described it as finding the balance to stand on the surface of a pond and then letting herself sink into it."

Due to the nature of the transformation zone, the industrial city was a strange shape, existing in a ring around Jason's existing domain. Each time he expanded his domain further into it, he made his way around, dealing with the anomalies. It was grim work in a bleak environment with unpleasant enemies but he slogged through, increasingly eager to leave.

When he claimed the final stretch of the city and cleared out the last of the anomalies, he sensed the boss make its appearance. After it was revealed to his aura senses, Jason went to scout it out. It was large, three metres tall and almost as wide. A hideously overdone version of the bad franks, it was a pile of mismatched, sick and fatty flesh, roughly stitched together. Only the crude iron exoskeleton bolted directly into the flesh held the blubbery mound in place.

It had faces on both sides of its flabby head and three thick, stubby legs holding it up like a tripod. It was not an elegant design, forcing the awkward creature to lumber slowly around. The arms, of which it had four, were the only part of it not sagging with fat. Far too long for its body, they were made of hard, toned muscle.

Held in its oversized arms were a pair of heavy gatling guns that looked quite similar to Jason's, although there were some important differences. Instead of a hopper at the top to seat an unstable genesis core, these were fed heavy bullets from a belt that ran out of the abomination's body, through the gun and then back into the anomaly.

"Is it some kind of freaky bullet golem? It's a shame I can't risk using the core launcher because that thing is not zippy."

"The arms seem much more flexible," Shade observed. "You should not underestimate its ability to manoeuvre those guns in your direction."

"It'll do a better job than me at least," Jason agreed. "My minigun weighs about as much as an economy hatchback."

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully as they watched the boss anomaly shamle awkwardly down the street.

"You know," he said, "I can't use the core launcher."

"Yes," Shade said.

"The thing is, though, I'm not the only one here."

"Oh dear," Shade said.

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Jason sprinted through the building as bullets tore into it, ripping through the steel wall to chase him as the anomaly walked its gun after him, spitting flame from the rotating barrels as the bullets streamed out. When he came to a hole in the floor he didn't avoid it or leap over but instead dropped straight down to the floor below. The line of bullets continued to trail him, dropping down and following as he turned and ran back in the direction he had come from.

Jason had found that while the abomination was oblivious to him up to a certain range. The moment he crossed that threshold, the anomaly's eyes locked onto him. Even through walls its gaze never wavered, as it immediately swung one of its guns on him.

Jason had been ready and opened up with his own minigun, managing to destroy one of the monstrosity's guns before it fired. As it turned the other on him, though, Jason's minigun seized up. The tremendous forces that had pumped through it as Jason used it to kill hundreds, if not thousands of anomalies finally took it past its limits.

Jason was forced to drop the weapon and run as bullets started screaming through the air, punching through everything in their path. Shade's ability to hide Jason from abnormal senses could likely have shielded him from the abomination's power to see through walls but that would defeat the point of playing decoy.

A dark shape dashed from the shadows of a building to approach the boss anomaly. Shade took the core launcher from his personal storage space. Although it was much lighter than the minigun, it still pushed the limits of what Shade could lift with his limited ability to impart physical force.

Shade dropped in an unstable genesis core and fired and, as Jason had anticipated, the launcher malfunctioned. It operated by agitating an unstable core, then wrapping it in a short-lived containment field and launching it. The containment field failed to activate and the weapon exploded on the spot, annihilating Shade's body and sprinkling the abomination across the city.



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

“That was unpleasant,” Shade said, another of his bodies emerging from Jason’s shadow. “Being torn apart by firmamental cosmic forces is not something I’d care to repeat.”

“Sorry about that,” Jason said as he clambered out through a hole in the bullet-riddled building. “Any lingering damage?”

“No,” Shade said. “You can reconstitute the lost shadow body with mana as usual.”

Jason found a gobbet of the boss anomaly and looted it, wisps of rainbow smoke appearing across the city where the remnants of the abomination were spread.

- 
- 100 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 1000 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 10000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  
  - [Doom Orb] has been added to your inventory.
  - [Flesh Essence] has been added to your inventory.
  - [Awakening Stone of Flesh] has been added to your inventory.
- 

“That’s a decent haul,” Jason said. “I’m not sure that the doom orb is going to help me out, though. If I’m breaking out of this place, I won’t need to unseal any more powers.

“Perhaps you should keep it, then,” Shade suggested. “A use can almost always be found for exotic items, even if that use was not what was originally intended.”

“Good point,” Jason said. “Some exotic items are more appealing than others, though.”

Jason went to the edge of his new territory, took out all his leftover unstable genesis cores and lobbed them into the gloom with all the silver-rank strength he could muster.

“I don’t want those things going boom the second we’re out of here. Do you think that gold-ranker blew up when he took them out?”

“Perhaps,” Shade said. “It seems equally likely that the cores disrupted his passage through the portal. He may have never come out the other side, his soul cast into the astral for my progenitor to claim.”

“What about the stable cores?” Jason asked. “I have a boatload of them. I’m kind of hoping they can help me stabilise the node space as I try to realign this link between worlds.”

“I think it will be safe,” Shade said. “Perhaps they can even be used to repair some of the transformation zones. Miss Dawn would be better equipped to advise you in this.”

“That would be nice.”

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Nikoleta and her family gawked at the indoor waterfall in the atrium of Jason’s pagoda, although after all they’d been through it was just one more thing on the pile of absurdity.

“This is your last chance to leave this place before I bring down the dome,” Jason said. “I don’t know what effect that will have. If you wish, I can send you outside first, but I can make no promises about what awaits you there either.”

“We have made our choice,” Nikoleta said, although her grandparents looked unhappy.

“Then I can offer you a suite to wait it out or you can observe from one of the balconies.”

“We’ll watch,” Nikoleta said.

“Very well.”

Jason was nervous and didn’t want to pass that along to the family, so he was uncharacteristically subdued. They took the elevator to the top floor and Jason led them out to look over his domain. The city extended out a few kilometres, beyond which was the forest spanning into the distance. Rising up beyond that were the windswept, agrarian highlands where he had found the family, the only survivors of the zone he had discovered. Unseen beyond those highlands was the wasteland city, waiting to be transformed.

“Transfigure new territory,” Jason murmured. They could not see the subsequent changes, although there was an industrial clanking that must have been cacophonous to be heard more than fifty kilometres away, through a range of hills and small mountains. Jason could feel the changes through his connection to the spirit domain, knowing that the once wasted city was being restored to a pristine industrial hub.

“Not that it does me any good.”

“Pardon?” Nikoleta asked.

“It’s nothing,” Jason said.

Jason estimated that the dome in the real world covered an area equivalent to his first and second territories, the pagoda and the city around it. His expectation was that when the transformation zone and the proto-space were separated, the city would remain. The rest he expected to be caught up in the proto-space as it disentangled from the transformation zone. He might even need to enter the now-separated dimensional space and eliminate an anchor monster to prevent a monster wave.

- 
- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
  - Territory has been renamed [Steamforge Circuit].
  
  - Anomalies attacking as a result of further spirit domain expansion will have increased power.
  
  - You have claimed sufficient territory to stabilise the transformation zone and separate it from the convergent astral space.
  
  - Separating the space with the current territory will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the surrounding reality. Claim additional territory to reduce the severity of this effect. Current severity reduction: 79.4%
  
  - Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?
- 

“That should be enough,” Jason said.

“Are you talking to the thing that lives in your shadow?” Nikoleta asked.

“He’s not a thing,” Jason said, not turning to look at her.

“He’s not human.”

“Neither are you!” Jason snapped, drawing all eyes. He panned his gaze over them.

“I’ve changed my mind. Shade, show them to a suite to wait this out.”

One of Shade's bodies emerged and led the family away as they threw wary glances back at Jason, who was quickly left alone. He thumped his hands angrily into the balustrade, then ran them anxiously over his face.

“They didn’t deserve that,” he said.

“You are under an understandable amount of stress, Mr Asano.”

“No one could ask for more,” Shade said, another body rising from Jason’s shadow.

“Yes they could,” Jason said. “If I do this and it isn’t enough, that’s game over. The world dies and not only did I fail to stop it but I probably sped it up.”

“Mr Asano, there are very few things in the cosmos that are truly new. I cannot say if what you are doing here is one of them but it is as far as I am aware and I have seen and heard more than you can imagine.”

“Great. I get to be the first guy to dissolve his planet in a new and interesting way.”

“Mr Asano—”

“I get it, Shade, bloody hell.”

“Jason!” Shade yelled, causing Jason’s head to make a startled swivel as he turned to his familiar.

“No one could ask for more,” Shade repeated, his voice once more composed.

“Whatever we face here, we face together.”

Jason felt the presence of his other familiars in his soul, silently supporting him. He looked out at his spirit domain.

“Stabilise the transformation zone.”

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Outside the dome, the vast corpse of the tentacle monster lay sprawled where it had slid off the dome, having been killed in a pitched battle with the gathered magical factions. The different factions had already carved large chunks of it off, taking them away to study, while others continued to pore over the corpse. It had rapidly grown to the size of a three-storey building, looking like a humungous sea anemone. Its massive trunk of a body was topped by a huge maw ringed by a forest of prehensile tentacles. The tentacles grabbed people, tossing them into the mouth, killing many before the assembled group finally killed it.

Jack Gerling looked at it from the camp set up by the American Network. His explosive powers had been critical in slaying the massive creature that used to be the gold-ranker, Guo.

While inside the combined proto-space/transformation zone, Gerling had felt small for the first time in a very long time. He contemplated the kind of magic involved, not just in transforming the gold ranker but the world itself in the form of transformation zones. The growing and unruly magic could reshape the world and the most powerful people on it, leaving them with no ability to resist.

This was true for all but one person and his enigmatic struggle against cosmic forces Gerling did not understand. He didn’t know how or why Asano was able to fight against powers that could reshape the world itself. His ability to open the previously impenetrable dome proved that he could, however. Gerling was determined to find out, and then find a way to take that power for himself.

Gerling felt a shift in the magic a moment before he saw the dome change. The swirling rainbow of the colours inside went wild, gradually going dark around the edges. Deep within the dome, the colour coalesced and changed, turning from rainbow chaos into a nebula pattern. An aura erupted from the dome, Gerling’s aura senses detecting its

spread extending dozens of kilometres away. Gerling recognised the aura as belonging to Jason Asano.

## Chapter 424

### You Really Aren't Local

Standing on the balcony on the pagoda's top floor, Jason surveyed his spirit domain, stretching off into the distance. He felt his connection to the vast territory, as if it were part of him.

"Stabilise the transformation zone."

A tremor immediately rocked the pagoda and did not pass, instead, continuing as a constant rumble. The entire pagoda felt like it was being hauled on a truck with mediocre suspension.

- 
- You are using your spirit domain to stabilise and separate an intermingled transformation zone and proto-space. Dissolution of the proto-space will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the attached reality.
  - Consolidating the proto-space into a permanent astral space will lessen the detrimental effects of the process.
  - Would you like to consolidate the proto-space into an astral space Y/N?

---

Jason's eyes went wide, delighted at anything that would increase the chances of success.

"Yes!"

- 
- Consolidating the astral space will require the consumption of [Stable Genesis Cores]. How many [Stable Genesis Cores] will you dedicate to this process?

---

"All of them!"

- 
- 1327 [Stable Genesis Cores] have been consumed. Proto-space apotheosis will take place alongside transformation zone reality integration.

---

The rumbling tremor grew into a full-blown earthquake and Jason started seeing chunks of street tear themselves out of the ground to float into the air, shrouded in rainbow light. Tiles ripped themselves out from the footpaths and planters broke apart, spilling dirt and flowers as chunks of stone drifted upwards like errant balloons. Flagstones of dark crystal lifted out of the road to join them, and in every place that broke apart, rainbow light shone from the holes left behind. Jason watched the shattering of his domain spread out from the central site of the pagoda, accelerating as it extended throughout the city.

An increasing density of rainbow light filled the air, obscuring Jason's vision as he stepped back from the edge of the balcony. The light filled the air but did not encroach on the pagoda, including the balcony space where Jason stood. The last thing he saw before his vision was obscured entirely was the spreading damage reaching the forest beyond the city.

As the process continued, Jason's connection to his spirit domain delivered increasing levels of painful feedback. It started small, barely noticeable as the first chunks broke away. By the time he could no longer see past the edge of the balcony he was grimacing against the pain but it was nothing he couldn't endure. Even as it continued to escalate, he didn't let out a yell.

If Jason's soul had been weaker, the pain the process was inflicting would likely have scarred it, pushing it to grow stronger. Compared to what he had experienced in the past, though, this was insufficient to even make a dent. Compared to the Builder's attacks or even the backlash from trying to forcibly manipulate reality with his aura, this pain was water splashing his feet at the beach. Rather than push back or try and shield himself from the pain, Jason delved into it with his senses, trying to better understand the process taking place.

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Everyone outside the dome was scrambling. Ritualists from different Network splinter factions were rushing to study the changes in the dome while others were preparing to either charge forward or run for the hills, depending on how the dome changed.

Many more people had come for this transformation zone than those in the past. The original hope had been that multiple reality cores would appear when the dome finally dropped. As the dome remained in place longer and longer, eclipsing the duration of any previous one, those desires had grown more avaricious. The factions were now anticipating unknown treasures, untold knowledge and untapped power, all waiting to be seized. If they had to shake it out of Jason Asano, that was something they were willing to do.

Gerling only paid half-attention to Cleary, his handler, as Cleary briefed him on the directives of the higher-ups. Gerling's assistant Fiona would summarise any relevant points afterwards and his gold-rank mind could easily split his focus anyway.

He cared little for the priorities of the people ostensibly above him, but so long as they controlled the reality core supply, he had to keep up appearances. He could always grab some cores and go rogue but Gerling knew that was a foolish move until he had more

long-term plans. For the moment, it would be borrowing trouble without anything worthwhile to show for it, so he continued playing the easy-to-please thug.

“Do you understand?” Cleary asked.

“Understand what?” Gerling asked. “You did all that talking to tell me what I already knew. Go in when the dome drops, take anything I find and kick the crap out of anyone who gets in my way. Maybe I should be giving the briefings.”

Cleary sighed.

“That’s an... adequate summation. Just don’t start trouble you can’t finish.”

Gerling held up a tight fist.

“There isn’t any trouble I can’t finish.”

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Jason didn’t ignore the pain stabbing into his soul through his connection to the spirit domain. He followed it with his senses, using it as a path into the heart of the changes taking place.

Jason had spent some time now in the study of astral magic theory, but it was his time exploring node space, coming to grips with the building blocks of reality where his understanding had truly grown. Being in node space was like brushing his fingers over the individual atoms of a molecule.

There was a dichotomy between the astral and the physical, a duality that seemed not just naturally disparate but intrinsically opposed. The difference between the universe and the astral was the divide between physical and spiritual, between body and soul.

Jason knew this separation was not absolute, despite almost every aspect of reality signalling that it was. His own body merged the spiritual and the physical into a cohesive whole. Knowing was not the same as understanding, however.

Having extended his senses into the wild magic of the transforming domain, he observed from the inside the interplay of the astral and the physical as the transformation zone was extricated from the proto-space. The spirit domain was a part of him, giving him unique insight as it went through the process of merging with physical reality.

Jason's understanding underwent its own transfiguration as his perspective, so long contextualised only by physical reality, expanded exponentially. His grasp of the astral went through explosive expansion, giving him a new understanding of the most fundamental aspects of the cosmos.

“Some secrets are not meant for the likes of you,” a voice said and Jason withdrew his senses. Startled at the intrusion and angry at the interruption, he turned to face the owner of the voice.



Jason had not sensed the man's approach nor the opening of the portal arch behind him. It was quite unlike Jason's portals, other than the general arch shape, looking like a pile of hard, earthen bricks stacked loosely in place. The portal energy in the archway was a swirl of reds, browns and yellows.

The man standing in front of the portal had a shock of red hair and pale skin with a freckled complexion. His eyes were an inhumanly bright green. Compared to his striking features, his clothes were simple robes that were loose but not bulky enough to entangle, leaving him with excellent freedom of movement. It was much like the design Jason preferred, but while Jason favoured black, grey and red tones, this man's robes were in light, earthy shades. Combined with his hair and complexion, it made him look like a Scottish Jedi.

"Do you know Ewan McGregor?" Jason asked.

"That is what you're asking in this situation?" the man said, letting a little of his diamond-rank aura show.

"It's what came to mind," Jason said. "Obi-Wan Kenobi? Nothing? You really aren't local, are you?"

"I am Shako," he man said. "I am a servant of the Builder."

"I know," Jason said. "I picked up on your star seed when you tried to impress me by letting your aura poke out of your pants. Please tell me the builder didn't just blow up my world by shoving a ranga through the dimensional wall."

"No," Shako said. "This event provides a window through which I am able to enter and leave without harming your world, so long as I am gone before this space reasserts itself in physical reality."

"So the Builder thought he'd take the chance to send someone in and off me?"

"No," Shako said. "He sent me to deliver his thanks."

"For what?"

"The current Builder inherited the power of his predecessor, but also his responsibilities. He inherited the mistake that was this world. It costs him nothing but dignity should this world be annihilated but the dignity of a great astral being is no small thing."

"Really? Sounds like a holdover from his mortal days, to me. What does an infinite being care about dignity? It seems a little petty."

"Be careful with your words, mortal."

"Mate, your boss sucks."

Shako's expression went very blandly diplomatic.

“You did not encounter him in the best of vessels,” Shako said. “Thadwick Mercer lingered like a disease, affecting even subsequent vessels for a time.”

“Vessels like you?” Jason surmised.

“Yes,” Shako confirmed and Jason laughed.

“You caught a dose of Thadwick, that's hilarious. Also, tell your boss to shove it up his arse. Thadwick was a top-shelf prick but he didn't turn your boss into a cosmic land bandit. He didn't strip astral spaces off worlds, killing people in job lots from the fallout. How many people has it been across all the realities and all the worlds? Billions? Trillions? He can take his thanks for whatever he's thanking me for and shove it so far up his quoit that it pops out his nose.”

“How... colourful. You don't want the gift he offers as parts of his thanks, then?”

“Your damn right I don't. Thus far, everything the Builder has sent my way has impaled my body a whole bunch of times and even took a run at my soul.”

“This gift is sent with gratitude, not malice.”

“It wasn't? You should have led with that. I'm definitely going to take the word of a guy whose boss tried to core me like an apple.”

“You would do well not to impugn my integrity, silver-ranker.”

“Mate, you're a captain in the fleet of a cosmic pirate admiral. How many people have you killed in the name of your boss playing with blocks like an infant? I'd tell you to take your integrity and shove it up your boss' arse, next to where he put his thanks, but you beat me to it. Probably by a few centuries.”

Shako reached out and Jason lurched forward, his neck falling into Shako's grip. His aura crushed down, suppressing Jason's aura in an instant.

“So, more Vader than Obi-Wan,” Jason said, his voice unstifled by the grip on his throat. “Obvious, now that I think about it.”

Jason met the diamond-ranker's gaze, unfazed by having his aura ground down to nothing.

“You think I won't kill you for your insolence?” Shako asked.

“If you're going to kill me, I can do bugger-all about it. I'm not going to pretend your boss is worthy of respect first because he's not, and I don't think it matters anyway. Your boss sent you here with orders to kill me or not. I'm willing to bet you follow them, either way.”

Jason closed his eyes, letting his instinct guide him. He drew on his spirit domain and the vast quantities of power currently coursing through it as reality itself was reshaped.

Melding it with his suppressed aura, Jason aura projected not his own aura but that of his entire spirit domain, pushing back against the suppressive force of the diamond ranker.

Shako sneered as he felt Jason attempt to push back, but it dropped off his face as he felt the aura pressure him from all around. Jason's inexpert control of his spirit domain was not enough to push back the power of an ancient and powerful diamond ranker even a little, but even noticing that moment of pressure from a mere silver-ranker chilled Shako to the core.

Shako's empty hand swung out, splattering Jason's head like a rotting melon. Jason's neck chain fell to the floor as Shako then palm-slapped Jason's chest, the whole torso exploding backwards, scattering across the balcony and into the rainbow energy outside. The force of the strike warped Jason's sword, which was merely bronze-rank. It also fell to the floor.

Jason's scattered body parts burned up in dark flame, limned in silver starlight, which merged to take the shape of a dark, star-filled phoenix. Shako started gathering transcendent light between his hands but the phoenix shot back, disappearing into the rainbow energy.

Another portal appeared next to Shako's portal arch, this one a shimmering sheet of silver-grey light. Through it stepped Dawn in her true body. Her celestine form had ruby hair and eyes, glimmering like actual gemstones.

"That's enough, Shako."

## Chapter 425

### A Sliver of Hope

Jason's star phoenix form was impervious to almost any form of attack, with transcendent damage being a critical exception. His aura could downgrade transcendent damage, but with a diamond-ranker suppressing his aura that would not come into effect. He chose, then, to risk diving into the storm of energy reforging his spirit domain as Shako gathered transcendent energy for an attack. As he disappeared into the rainbow chaos outside of the pagoda, Dawn's true form emerged from a shimmering portal.

"That's enough, Shako."

"Dawn," Shako said, dismissing his gathered energy.

"I cannot imagine that this is what the Builder sent you here to do," Dawn said. "You have come into this world and killed Jason Asano. This is in express violation of the compact between the Builder, the Reaper and the World-Phoenix."

"This is not Asano's world," Shako countered.

"You may find it hard to convince the World-Phoenix and the Reaper of that."

"He deserved death. That man has taken that which belongs to the Builder and turned it against his faithful."

"Faithful? Is the Builder truly that obsessed with making a world so that he might become a god? He is already so much more. You realise the entire cosmos thinks he's gone mad."

"You would belittle the Builder for what he has made?" Shako asked. "Without the Fundament Gate he stole from the Builder, he would never have been able to affect this place and remake it."

"Then you should be grateful that he took it. The Builder had billions of years to rectify the mistakes of his predecessor, but his inaction has allowed the task to fall to a boy."

"You speak as if your World-Phoenix played no part."

"The World-Phoenix acts in accordance with her purpose," Dawn said, anger taking over her usually tranquil expression. "The Builder has ignored his own purpose by leaving the situation alone and has now chosen to make use of it in service of his private intentions. This world would not be crumbling if the Builder had not struck a bargain with a lowly god to exploit it."

"Perhaps I may have acted with haste," Shako conceded.

"You and your master both have a habit of thinking like mortals. You get caught up in pride and focus on singular things when you need to take a larger perspective. You are

like Asano in this way. I think, perhaps, that Thadwick Mercer was a more fitting vessel than you or the Builder are willing to admit. You pass off questionable decisions as his influence, yet is that truly the case?"

"I did not come here to be insulted or listen to your slander against my master, Dawn. There is only so much I am willing to tolerate, even from you."

"Clearly," Dawn said, looking pointedly at Jason's necklace and sword on the floor. They lay where they had fallen when Shako destroyed Jason's body. "But you didn't come here to violate the agreement your master made, either."

"I still hold that this is still not Asano's world. There is no violation."

"Then your master and mine will have to settle this with the Reaper, then."

Shako expression took on an angry grimace.

"Perhaps I have pushed the boundaries of the agreement and a concession can be made. When Asano returns to the other world, no Builder cultist of a rank higher than his will attack him."

Dawn smiled.

"That is worth less than nothing. The Builder doesn't keep its own word, so why would it keep yours? Even if it does, so what? Your promise does not preclude diamond-rank allies or a hundred silver-rankers being sent after Asano."

"You think the Builder so petty?"

"Yes. I would advise against trying to grab my throat for saying so, though."

Shako looked as if he had eaten something unpleasant as he swallowed his retort.

Dawn waited as he took a moment to calm himself.

"What do you want?" Shako asked, his voice measured once more.

"Asano claimed for himself something created by the Builder. A door."

"The Fundament Gate. Asano should not have such access to the foundations of reality."

"If the Builder didn't want mortals to have that kind of access, he shouldn't have given it to them."

"It was an item; the Builder's to give or take. Asano should not have absorbed it."

Dawn laughed, bringing a surprised expression to Shako's face.

"If the Builder thought that mortals would only use what he gave them for the purposes he intended, then he is as great a fool as any of them."

Shako seethed at the continuing insults to the Builder but Dawn was not Jason.

Shako showed not so much as the shadow of an aggressive move.

“I don’t know why you bring up the Fundament Gate,” Shako said through gritted teeth. “Asano had already taken it for himself and the Builder has neither claim nor control over it. Again, I ask, what is it that you want?”

“I wish to create an item that he can also absorb. One that lets him use the gate to anchor a bridge between Earth and Pallimustus, using the existing link as a basis.”

“An astral bridge is the domain of the World-Phoenix,” Shako said. “You don’t need the Builder for that.”

“Improperly anchored, the bridge will be vulnerable to tampering and destruction. The Fundament gate will allow him to securely anchor it in physical reality. Give me the designs of the Fundament Gate so the World-Phoenix may create a complimentary item that works with it.”

“That is not within my authority to offer,” Shako said. “The door was the Builder’s personal design.”

“But you do have it. You simply need permission to pass it along.”

“No. You ask too much.”

“Too much? I’m not even done making demands and already you’re refusing? Then the Builder’s violation of the agreement will stand. This means that the cult of the World-Phoenix may intervene directly with the Builder’s invasion of Pallimustus. We haven’t raised our hands since before you were born, but you’ve heard the stories, right?”

Shako’s expression went dark.

“In the face of an opportunity to be free to act directly,” he asked, “why would you accept another concession? Why would you do this for Asano?”

“He’s a friend.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I originally wondered why the World-Phoenix assigned me this task personally,” Dawn said. “I came to realise that it is not always good to become too separated from mortal sensibilities. Not a problem you seem to have, but I did and the World-Phoenix saw this. This is why she sent me to watch over a man whose sensibilities are very, very mortal.”

“Why would the World-Phoenix want you to become lesser?”

“Not lesser, Shako. Grounded.”

“When you are ascending to the heavens, grounded is lesser,” Shako argued. “You and I stand on the cusp of true transcendence. Why should we care about mortal concerns?”

“Because if we don’t understand the mortal parts of ourselves, it causes problems when we leave the last of our mortality behind.”

“What kind of problems?”

“Well, for example, we might go off and start looting worlds for parts so we can cobble them together in some mad desire to play god.”

“I will only tolerate these insults to the Builder for so long, Dawn.”

“We have not yet finished negotiating the consequences of the last time your patience expired,” Dawn said, her ruby eyes glimmering and her voice filled with cool but unmistakable menace. “Are you so anxious to concede even more?”

Shako took an involuntary step back.

“That’s what I thought,” Dawn said. “Now, our time is limited and we should return to the topic at hand. The designs for the door.”

“I can likely obtain them for you,” Shako said, although his expression was unwilling. “Again, though, I have to ask why. He has knowledge and power enough to build a bridge back to the other world using the link between them. He doesn’t need this object you want to build for him. You realise that if he absorbs it, he would be intrinsically linked to the bridge he subsequently creates. If he dies, the bridge will collapse.”

“Yes.”

Shako narrowed his eyes.

“That’s your intention,” he realised. “You’re looking past the Builder invasion of Pallimustus.”

“Yes. Asano is yet to realise that success in his current challenge will be the very thing that sets his next one in motion.”

“You haven’t told him, have you?”

“I am forbidden. Jason does not always make the best choices and the World-Phoenix doesn’t want him finding out and risking two worlds to avoid that outcome. This bridge will be his compensation. A sliver of hope in his darkest hour.”

“When the time comes, you won’t help him?”

“It falls outside the World-Phoenix’s authority and it will not be allowed. This is the most I can do.”

“And you would give up the chance to send all your forces against us for that?”

“The World-Phoenix is not the Builder. It prefers to avoid such crude methods. But I will need another concession.”

“And what is that?”

“Allowance for me to go to Pallimustus.”

“Absurd. Do you think the great astral beings will permit a half-transcendent to intervene in a physical reality of that level? If you go, the Builder can send his own half-transcendents and by the time we're all done fighting, that world will be a lifeless cinder. Neither of us wants that.”

“I will not confront any of your forces or deliver any material aid carrying the power of the World-Phoenix, any other great astral being, or otherwise disproportional to the existing power of the world in question. Under those terms, the great astral beings will allow it.”

“Then why bother going?”

“To warn them that you are coming. And when.”

“And you think I will allow this?”

“Allow? I'm going to Pallimustus and you can do nothing about it. Your choice is whether I'm bringing words or an army. Unless you genuinely believe the Builder can convince the others you did not violate the compact by killing Asano.”

Once more Shako seethed in silence, before raising his eyes to glare at Dawn.

“I cared about you very deeply, once,” he said.

“Yet you never really knew me. It's a very mortal failing.”

Shako frowned and then bowed his head. A presence came over him, transforming his aura from diamond-rank to transcendent. When he stood, his expression and body language were completely different. Gone was the frustrated rage, replaced with imperious stoicism.

“You are impertinent, servant of the World-Phoenix,” the Builder said.

“My new friend has been a bad influence,” Dawn said. “I believe you've met.”

“You seek to provoke me.”

“It's worked in the past.”

“I will not expose myself to further concessions,” the Builder said. He reached into his robes and retrieved a crystal holding it up in front of her.

“The designs of the Fundament Gate. You may have it, under the condition that it is designed such that once it is complete, Asano's ability to enter the fundamental realm and manipulate it is revoked.”

“Acceptable,” Dawn said. “He only does so out of necessity and has no other reason to access it.”

“Very well,” The Builder said, handing the crystal over. “You may travel to Pallimustus. So long as your actions are in accord with what we great astral beings collectively allow, I will not count it as a violation of the compact.”



“One more thing,” Dawn said.

“You test my forbearance, servant.”

“Your servant is the one who made the violation. Be grateful the World-Phoenix is willing to accept any concessions at all.”

“What do you want?”

“Your violation was in coming here and killing Asano. You have to leave him be in the other world.”

“He will come for my people. You expect them to lay down and die?”

“You will restrict your attempts to kill him to when he comes looking for trouble. That will be almost constantly, so that should not be an onerous concession. I won't bother with specific terms as we both know there will always be ways around them. You will agree to abide by the spirit of the condition I've put forth.”

“Acceptable. Asano is no more threat to me than any other silver-ranker. He is irrelevant to my greater plans.”

Dawn raised an eyebrow but did not argue.

“Then the terms are struck,” she said.

Shako staggered as the Builder left him. He looked unhappily at Dawn, and then made for his portal, pausing before passing through.

“It was good to see you, Dawn. Even under these circumstances.”

“They're only going to get worse, Shako. You chose a master poorly.”

“I chose the right one for me,” Shako said. “You have no right to judge me.”

Dawn nodded, acknowledging the point. Shako stepped through his portal arch and it sank into the floor, vanishing. Dawn looked down at Jason's warped sword on the floor and picked it up, carrying it through her portal.

\*\*\*

Jason returned to the balcony as the duration of his star phoenix form came to an end. The man that killed him was gone, along with the portal he arrived in. Instead, there was a vertical sheet of silver-grey light. He looked around, finding only his necklace with his dark guardian amulet and the miniaturised cloud flask hanging from it.

His sword was nowhere to be seen. He could still feel his connection to the soul-bound item, so it wasn't destroyed, but he could not sense its location. Without it, the additional effects of his other items would not take effect, so he couldn't call the mist shroud from his cloud flask.

Unsure of what to do next, Jason could sense the spirit domain approaching the end of its transformation. He examined the shimmering sheet of light with his aura senses

which confirmed his guess that it was a portal. Like Shako's, it was diamond-rank. As he was contemplating it, Dawn stepped out. It was the first time Jason had seen her true form, her red hair replaced with the gemstone hair of a celestine. She was wearing a flowing white robe trimmed with flaming colours of orange, yellow and red.

"Dawn? Looking good. You didn't see another guy around here, did you?"

"Shako is gone."

"Good. I honestly didn't think that guy would gank me."

"You are forgetting the door you took from the Builder. Just touching on your aura will send any Builder servant into a fury."

"Oh, right. He did feel a bit like a boiling kettle, but I thought that was just about the thing between me and the Builder."

"The star seed inside him reacted negatively to your aura. If he weren't powerful enough to control the urge, he might have attacked you on sight."

"He didn't control the urge. He killed me."

"You talked to him," Dawn said.

"You say that like it's an explanation."

"Of why someone would want to kill you? It is."

"That's a little hurtful."

"Jason, I have only a short time for explanations. I must leave before the transformation zone fully merges with your world."

She held up what looked like a small model bridge. It was contained in a crystal vessel, like a ship in a bottle.

"The World-Phoenix personally crafted this item moments ago. This is an object akin to the door of the Builder, and you can absorb it the same way. Once you have restored the link between worlds to its original state, or close enough that your world isn't in immediate peril, you can use it in node space to establish a bridge between worlds."

"A bridge. As in, a walk back and forth bridge?"

"Not at first," Dawn said. "Once you establish the bridge on both sides, it will stabilise the link between worlds and prevent the link from being manipulated again. Over time, the bridge will repair the damage to your world's dimension membrane and, eventually, open a passage between the worlds."

"How eventually?"

"Years. Possibly decades."

"It won't be my way back to Pallimustus, then."

“It can be, if you act swiftly. When the link is restored to a close enough point to its original state, there will be a backwash of magic as your world stops absorbing all the excess magic.”

“We’ve talked about that before. It’s what will trigger the monster surge in Pallimustus and let the Builder invade.”

“Yes. But you can also use that surge and the incomplete bridge to travel to Pallimustus, so long as you do so before the magical backwash dissipates. The outworlder gift evolution the World-Phoenix designed for you will allow you to survive the journey. Anyone you carry inside your spirit vault will be safe.”

“Will you be coming with us? I know you won’t go by spirit vault but you have an interdimensional spaceship or something, right? I’m assuming that’s where that portal come from since you don’t have a portal power yourself.”

“It is, and I will be leaving for the other world. Ahead of you, in fact.”

“You’re going now,” Jason realised.

“You have everything you need to do what must be done. More than that, I trust you to do it. The other world needs me more than you do.”

“For what?”

“After years of being in readiness for a monster surge that never comes, the other world will not be prepared when it finally does. We have a good estimate of how long you will take to repair the link so I’m going to warn them that it’s close.”

“I’ll see you there, then?”

“You will, although do not anticipate me solving your problems for you. I still have restrictions by which I must abide.”

“Of course you do. Can you check in on my friends for me?”

“I can and will.”

Jason pulled a recording crystal from his inventory and tossed it to her.

“Show that to my mates, yeah?”

“I will.”

“One last thing before I go. Once you complete the bridge on the other side, you will lose access to node space.”

“At that point, I won’t need it. What about the effect the door has on Builder minions?”

“The lost power to open node space will be channelled into enhancing that effect.”

Jason grinned.

“I’ll call that a win.”

Dawn looked past Jason at the energy storm swirling beyond the balcony.

"I cannot delay any longer."

"Yeah, no worries. Oh, have you seen my sword? The other guy didn't take it, did he?"

"Your sword is in no state to be of use, so I have taken it," she said walking up to the portal. "It shall be waiting for you in the other world."

"Nice. You know, for a super god's lackey, you're an alright sheila."

"Better to be a queen than a pawn, Jason."

Before he could respond, she stepped through the shimmering portal and it vanished.

"Bugging off with the last bloody word, are you?" he said to the empty space the portal had occupied. A warm smile crossed his face.

"Yeah," he conceded. "It was a pretty good exit line."

## Chapter 426

### End-User Licence Agreement

Jason looked out at the swirling rainbow energy beyond the pagoda. A moment of desperation had led him to dive into it while in the star phoenix form following his latest resurrection. The energy that had passed through him in that unusual state had once more heightened his understanding of the astral energies at play.

The gains were not worth the trade-off. Jason no longer had the safety net of his resurrection power, at least not until he ranked up in a decade or more. There was nothing he could have done in the face of a diamond-ranker and he still didn't know if that had been the Builder's intention all along.

Had the Builder sent Shako ostensibly under a flag of resolving conflict that he might 'lose control' and kill Jason in anger? Was the entire purpose to try and strike at Jason when the agreement with the other great astral beings was arguably not in effect? No one was under the illusion that Jason would actually die, but now he would head back to a world full of the Builder's minions with permanent death very much a concern.

Jason reached out a hand and let the rainbow light flow through his fingers, no longer fearful of the energies involved. He now understood both it and himself enough that he no longer feared contacting it. Jason's body, like the energy itself, was a gestalt of the physical and the spiritual, of matter and non-material forces not just paired like body and soul, but reforged into something else.

Jason also had some ability to manipulate the rainbow energy. This was a combination of his nature, his understanding and one of the effects of the bespoke outworlder power the World-Phoenix designed for him.

- 
- While within the astral you will be able to create and maintain a small zone of physical reality around you. This does not grant the ability to enter or traverse the astral.

---

Jason didn't do anything with the energy as it washed between his fingers, not being foolish enough to interfere with the larger process going on. At first, it had seemed like the pagoda would remain unchanged, but this was not the case.

- 
- Pagoda transfiguration will take place in stages. Please evacuate the third floor.
-

“Wait,” Jason said. “Is that the European/Australian floor naming where it goes ground floor, then first floor, second floor, etc, so what’s called the third floor is the fourth level of the building? Or is it the system they use everywhere else, where the ground level is the first floor, the second level is the second floor, etc?”

---

### Help: Localised Floor Designations

- Floor numbering begins on the ground floor, with the first floor above it being designated the ‘first floor.’ Would you like to change the numbering to an alternate system?

---

“It’s fine. I just don’t want to evacuate the wrong floor.”

- 
- The third floor is the fourth level of the building. Please evacuate any people and do not allow access during the transfiguration process.

---

The Slovakian family was one level below that, on the floor made up entirely of residential suites.

“Shade, make sure our guests don’t go wandering.”

“Of course, Mr Asano.”

After a short while, energy flooded over the pagoda balcony on the third floor, washing in and sending the pagoda through another transformation. After it washed back out, the system warned Jason to evacuate the top floor, then the others in descending order. He wasn’t sure why the process started on the second-highest floor but it was likely because that’s where the portal room was.

Jason reunited with the family as they played musical chairs with the transforming pagoda levels. The transformed levels took a form much more like the city around it had been, constructed out of cloud-stuff in fairy tale colours, mimicking the makeup of the constructs from Jason’s cloud flask. This was everything from walls, floors and ceilings to furniture and fittings.

The transformation also came with a redesign. The ground floor remained much the same: an atrium with a waterfall in the middle of the room, spilling from the mezzanine above. The first floor continued to overlook the atrium but was an open space that was the new portal area. There were ten portal arches, all in the dark crystal of Jason’s portal arch, but none of them were active.

The second floor was taken up by what looked to be an administrative centre, with offices and a bullpen. The third, formerly the portal room level, was taken up by a single

residential suite with multiple bedrooms. The top floor was a single bedroom residential suite. The entire pagoda was flooded with Jason's aura, which felt benevolent rather than hostile, except for on the top floor. There it was heavy and oppressive, except to Jason himself.

There were also new levels underground, which were empty storage spaces. As with the top floor, Jason's aura was much stronger there.

As Jason explored the pagoda in the wake of its latest changes, he felt the energy outside start to thin. It was imperceptible to ordinary senses, at first, but by the time Jason was again standing on the top floor balcony, it was visibly disappearing. He started seeing the city reappear through the swirling rainbow light and spotted the dome high above. As expected, the pagoda was placed directly under the dome's peak. Unlike when he had entered, the dome was much darker, but with a swirling nebula of colour.

\*\*\*

Gerling could sense the change in the dome. It was the first time this idiosyncratic example held true to his experiences from other transformation zones, as it was the familiar feeling of a dome about to vanish, revealing what lay inside.

Gerling was far from the only one poised to move after sensing the change, and when parts of the dome started to dissolve, all the people who had been wary after the dome's changes suddenly charged back up the sides, looking for holes to dive into. Gerling didn't join them, remaining impassively at the edge of the American Network camp. The other gold-ranker from the US, who had arrived just hours ago, did not share his reticence, tearing off at speed.

"Gerling!" his handler, Cleary yelled. "Why aren't you moving?"

"I'll go when I'm good and ready," Gerling snarled.

"Every major force in the world has bolstered their presence here, and you want to play wait and see?"

Gerling looked at Cleary with disdain.

"I've been in there once. Rushing around is a good way to get killed."

"That was when it was active," Cleary said. "Now that the dome is coming down, normal magical conditions will reassert themselves."

Gerling didn't bother to argue, closing his eyes and extending his senses. With the dome at its centre, Asano's aura had covered a geographically significant portion of western Slovakia. Gerling felt it now start to rapidly contract. He wanted to see what state it ended up in before he approached the swiftly-opening transformation zone.

"I didn't take you for a coward," Cleary said and Gerling's eyes shot open to get a missile lock on Cleary's face. Gerling's aura squeezed Cleary's like a car compactor until Cleary stood quivering on the spot.

"I'm sorry, I was distracted," Gerling apologised. "I didn't hear that last thing you said. Would you be so kind as to repeat it?"

Cleary's mind was screaming at his legs to run but they wouldn't listen.

"Mr Cleary?" Gerling asked quizzically.

Gerling released his aura and Cleary fled in a stumbling run.

\*\*\*

The rainbow light was gone and sunlight broke through the dome more and more as it dissolved away. It lit up the fairytale kingdom that Jason's city had turned into, with colourful cloud houses, tiled pathways, flowers, trees and parks. The designs were an eclectic hodgepodge of styles, drawing influences from across the world, with Middle-eastern influences bumping into Japanese, South American and European influences. It should have been a hodgepodge, yet somehow worked, the odd, magical materials and bright colours tying it all together.

"In an animated movie kind of way," Jason mumbled to himself as he looked it over. He was anxiously awaiting system boxes that he knew would be coming.

- 
- You have successfully separated the overlapping transformation zone and proto-space. Transformation zone is reintegrating with physical reality. Effects of the abnormal space are no longer in place. Your essence abilities are unsealed.
  - Transformation zone was not fully stabilised. Reintegration with physical reality is having a localised disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane, risking rupture.
  - Proto-space has been stabilised into a permanent astral space. This is stabilising the disruption and dispersing it to have a diminished effect over a wider area.
- 

Jason felt a tremble in the ambient magic. To him, with his soul strength and connection to the astral, it was a ripple in a pond. He could sense that it was happening on a massive scale, however, and worried that to others it would be a tsunami.

\*\*\*

While there were many silver and even gold-rank individuals around the dome, there were far more bronze and iron-rankers in the camps in supporting roles. When the world's magic became a tidal wave of chaos, the silver-rankers fared well enough and the gold-rankers were fine but the rest fell to the ground, screaming.



Gerling felt some of the iron-rank auras get snuffed out as they couldn't handle the pressure and died. The normal rankers in the area, mostly in the nearby city of Nitra, did not seem to be affected in any impactful fashion, at least so far as Gerling's senses could make out.

Gerling closed his eyes, expanding his aura over the American network's camp and trying to shield it from the effects. It was only partially effective, but that was enough to bring the bronze-rankers to their senses, while the iron-ranks went from tortured screams to pain-stricken moans.

\*\*\*

Jason jumped lightly off the balcony, grabbed the edge of the roof above with his restored shadow arm and flicked himself onto it. Standing at the peak of the slope, he observed his surroundings as the dome continued to dissolve over his head.

- 
- Dimensional disruption has rendered the dimensional membrane more permeable, raising the baseline magic density level of [Earth]. Localised zones of increased dimensional permeability will have heightened levels of magical density.
  - Once the new levels of ambient magic have normalised, [Earth] will no longer be subject to restrictions on mana, stamina and health recovery due to extreme low magic conditions.
  - Due to increased levels of magic permeability, magic will no longer accumulate externally and manifest as proto-spaces. Magic will manifest directly in the world.
  - [Earth] is currently subject to an abnormally large influx of magic. The newly permeable dimensional membrane is more vulnerable to excessive magic and will degenerate more rapidly.
- 

Jason's shoulder slumped with relief. It was far from good news, but at least the world wasn't going to be destroyed this week.

"Congratulations, Mr Asano," Shade said, manifesting from Jason's shadow. "You just saved the world."

Jason let out a weary laugh.

"I thought it would feel awesome, but I'm just tired."

"Perhaps it will feel better after you have time to rest," Shade suggested.

"I don't have time to rest," Jason said. He could already feel silver and gold-rankers encroaching on his spirit domain.

As anticipated, his domain now covered the space up to his second territory, which was the original stretch of city. The rest had been shunted into an astral space that he could sense, both with his power to detect astral spaces and through his connection to it.

He felt the power of his spirit domain settling around him and it was accompanied by a wall of text.

---

- You have established a permanent spirit domain. The maximum total area your spirit domains can cover is limited by your soul strength and your rank. Current amount of maximum spirit domain established: 3266%. Increase your rank to increase your maximum total spirit domain size.
- This spirit domain has a connected astral space. The astral space gains the full effects of your spirit domain but does not count against your maximum spirit domain size. The portals in the [Arrival Pagoda] connecting to various locations in the astral space are now active. Any non-hostile may use the portals by default but you may individually grant or deny access or set alternate criteria for entry.
- The magical density of your spirit domains and the interconnected astral spaces is artificially limited to silver-rank. This only effects monster manifestations as non-monster manifestations are not connected to magical rank. Increase your rank to increase the level of monster manifestations that occur within your spirit domains.
- Monster manifestations will be shifted to outside of your spirit domain or into wilderness areas of the attached astral space. Monsters that manifest into wilderness areas of the astral space are not subject to the negative effects of the astral space.
- Anyone or anything hostile to you, your domain or any non-hostiles within your domains will immediately acquire the [Blood From a Stone], [Mortality] and [Weakness of the Flesh] afflictions. They will also continually accumulate instances of the [Sin] affliction, which they will clearly sense. Those that remain for extended periods will periodically accumulate instances of the [Wages of Sin] affliction. Any hostile actions against you, your domain or anyone within your domain will immediately accumulate additional instances of [Wages of Sin]. All spirit domain effects ignore rank disparity and cannot be resisted or cleansed but end immediately on departure from the spirit domain.
- Anyone who dies from the effects of the spirit domain will be consumed by transcendent damage. They will be looted and their possessions will be sent to the vault in the [Arrival Pagoda] of that domain space.
- Hostility is determined by the true intent of those entering your spirit domain. Their true intent cannot be hidden by any means, including self-deception. You may individually designate anyone within your spirit domain as hostile or non-hostile at any time.
- Those who truly venerate you while within your spirit domain will have instances of curse, disease, poison, holy and unholy afflictions periodically converted to instances of [Integrity].
- You can sense the location and aura of anyone within any of your spirit domains at any time, over any distance. There are no means to avoid this effect, regardless of rank or nature of the ability. At your current rank, this effect can cross the localised

dimensional boundary of an astral space but not between universes. Increase your rank to sense your spirit domains in alternate realities.

---

"It's like an end-user licence agreement. Can I just hit 'I agree' and move on?"

Jason understood what his spirit domain could do through his connection to it. The whole veneration aspect worried him a great deal so he put it aside to concentrate on the aspects that would keep him alive with as a good portion of the world's magical power descending on him.

Broadly speaking, anyone who invaded the domain with hostile intent would get a warning as they accumulated the sin affliction. They would also get a set of Jason's afflictions that let his powers bypass immunities. If they ignored the warnings and refused to leave, they would suffer damage that continued to multiply until it killed them and their body was erased from existence.

"That's quite harsh."

Jason could already feel the power affecting the ambitious intruders looking for plunder. They were rushing through the city, some searching the houses on the outskirts while others, largely the more powerful ones, rushed towards the pagoda they saw towering over the city. The new buildings were no more than two or three storeys high, so it was easy to see.

Waiting on the pagoda's roof, Jason returned his outfit to his inventory, calling his conjured blood robe and starlight cloak. Jason held out a hand, blood spraying out to accumulate into Colin's humanoid form. Looking like Jason minus the cloak, but with purple-red skin, he stood to Jason's left. Shade stood to Jason's right and Gordon also manifested, forming a line with the others as they awaited the gold-rankers, silver-rankers and ancient vampires running, riding and flying towards them.

"Shade, could you take the family down into the vault, please?"

"Of course, Mr Asano."

## Chapter 427

### Negotiations

Gold-rankers, silver-rankers and even a few bold bronze-rankers went storming into the dome as it broke down. Once it was entirely gone and the transformed area revealed for all to see, even more followed.

Gerling still stood patiently, observing. Usually, a transformation zone turned an area into a supernatural reflection of its original state, but the Slovakian farmland had turned into a town from an animated movie, with colourful cloud houses, flowers and trees everywhere. It wasn't even the same as it had been while Gerling was inside.

Even as Gerling observed, he sensed the bronze-rankers all turn back and leave the zone. Many of the silver-rankers were doing the same and Gerling moved to meet one returning to the American Network camp. Gerling led him into the prefab building that held the camp bar, went behind the counter and poured them a stiff drink each.

"Thanks, Jack," the man said and they both knocked back their glasses with a gulp. Gerling poured them another glass each.

"What did you run into, Clint?"

"I'm not sure," Clint said. "As soon as I entered that weird town it felt like I was trespassing. The sense grew as I didn't leave and there was this growing sense of dread. More than that, though, it was like I was, I don't know. Setting myself up for retribution? The worst part, the thing that got me the hell out of there, is that I kind of felt like I deserved it. That creeped me right out and I bailed."

"Like you deserved it? That retribution you felt coming?"

"Yeah. It's like... I'm not sure how to describe it. It was as if I knew that my own choices were wrong and whatever happened to me, I had coming."

"Like a sin," Gerling said.

"Yeah, that's it," Clint said. "I never grew up religious, but yeah. It's like trespassing on that place is a sin. How does that work?"

"Sin is one of Asano's essences," Gerling said. "He did that to you."

"I'm going to leave that guy to you," Clint said. "He's clearly above my pay grade, and my pay grade is pretty damn good."

Clary opened the door and walked in.

"Wagner," he said, looking at Clint. "Why did you go in there, only to turn around and come right back?"

"It's dangerous," Gerling said. In a blur of gold-rank speed, he moved around the bar and interposed himself between Clint and Cleary. Cleary took a step back, still shaken from his last conversation with Gerling.

"We're missing our window."

Gerling tilted his head as he concentrated on his aura senses.

"The first silver-ranker just died trying to get back out," Gerling said. "The others are running for it but he went too deep."

"Died?" Cleary asked. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It wasn't one of ours."

"Goddamn it," Cleary said, running a hand over his mouth. "Wagner, the place is really that hostile?"

"Just walking in there felt like a sin," Clint confirmed.

"Sin?" Cleary asked, sharing a look with Gerling. "Asano?"

Gerling nodded.

"He's clearly in control," Gerling said.

"Couldn't you have taken control while you were in there?" Cleary asked. "You're stronger than him."

"You may have noticed, Cleary, but Asano is neck-deep in mysteries. He had enough control from the start to be in control of whether we came or went. As much as I loathe to admit it, I wouldn't have gotten out of there without him."

"And now he's what? Built a magical town in the European countryside?"

Cleary shook his head with a sigh.

"Alright," Cleary continued. "I'm going to put a moratorium on our people going in until we learn more," Cleary said. "No point sending our people to die when we don't even know what's in there. In the meantime, could you get closer and see if you can glean any information about the place? Your senses are better than most of the tests our ritualists can do."

Gerling nodded.

"I'll go take a look."

\*\*\*

Jason sensed the two elders of the Slovakian family taking on sin afflictions and mentally removed them from the list of people being attacked by his spirit domain. It seemed that Nikoleta wasn't kidding about her grandparents thinking ill of him.

He could feel the intruders suffering the effects as they moved into the astral space. Some were turning back quickly while others only did once the ominous feelings they

experienced became necrosis eating away at their flesh. Only those who had charged in towards the pagoda and then ignored the damage they were taking suffered greatly and the silver-ranked ones amongst them turned back.

The silver-rankers had no trouble escaping if they left promptly and the gold-rankers could endure far more. Only the bold bronze-rankers who ignored the ominous feelings and kept going until the damage kicked in were killed.

It was only a matter of time before the multiplicate effects of the damage overcame even the gold-rankers, but they were an order of magnitude tougher than even silvers. While the defensive measures of Jason's domain ignored rank disparity, they were still silver-rank effects. The gold rankers would be able to hold out for a considerable time.

Two gold-rank essence users and three vampires approached the pagoda through the air. One of the essence users was Chen, who Jason already knew, while the other was white, which meant American. Chen was flying freely, while the other essence user was held aloft by mechanical wings. Two of the vampires were standing on a cloud of blood mist, while the last was on the back of a giant raven that had no trouble beating its wings to hover in place.

They lined up in the air in front of the pagoda, where Jason and his familiars were lined up in turn. Jason pushed the hood back to reveal his face.

"Something I can help you with?" he asked casually.

"Mr Asano," Chen said. "How much control do you have over this place?"

"Mate, when was the last time you have a little tug-a-lug?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know, took a solo flight. Picked a pound of meat. Rubbed the lamp until the genie came out."

Chen took on an incredulous expression.

"Are you talking about...?"

"Yep," Jason said.

"Why would you ask that?"

"Based on how you kicked off this conversation, I thought that questions the other person definitely won't answer was the dynamic we were going with."

"Why bother letting this weakling prattle," one of the vampires said. "I will make him talk."

"No—" Chen said but the vampire had already leapt off the blood cloud at Jason.

Vampires lacked the magical senses of an essence user, so it hadn't noticed the invisible

bubble Jason had encapsulated the pagoda's roof in. It was a feature of his cloud constructs, just a normal wall with the transparency maxed out.

After it had already jumped, the vampire's gold-rank sense of touch realised the bubble was there from the way air was moving around him. He shifted to landed gracefully on the dome instead of smacking into it and immediately started hammering on the slightly squishy, invisible dome of cloud-stuff with his fist.

"Colin," Jason said.

Red strips of bloody cloth shot out from Colin, wrapping around the vampire's arms, legs and head. It pulled itself free easily and leapt back to the mist cloud, but savage welts marked its skin where the clothing had been ripped away.

"You can force your way through this barrier," Jason said. "While you do that I'll drop down through the roof, which you'll need to break through as well. Then the next one and the next one. How long do you think you can stick around for? You category fours are tough but surely you realise the damage is increasing exponentially."

"We would like to negotiate access to this space," Chen said.

"Because that's how the Vikings did it," Jason said. "They took their longboats, rowed over to England and negotiated the rape and pillage rights."

"This man blathers nonsense," the injured vampire said, even as its wounds closed up. "We should act together. The barrier isn't that strong."

"There are no treasures for you here," Jason said.

"You expect us to believe that?" the other essence user asked.

"I don't care what you believe," Jason said. "There's a whole town of stuff that doesn't help you at all but feel free to poke around for as long as it takes you to melt."

"The good stuff is obviously in this tower," the American said. "I'm coming around the vampire's plan. Let's smash our way in."

"If that is what you intend, then I wish you luck," Chen said. "I disregarded Mr Asano's warning once before and almost lost my life, so I will not participate."

He turned to Jason.

"Is there truly no room for compromise, Mr Asano?"

"If I didn't have the power to hold you off, you'd all be holding me upside down and shaking out the goodies," Jason said. "You come here to take my stuff, realise you can't, and then want to compromise? With the deepest respect, Mr Chen, go stick it up your arse."

Chen gave Jason a little smile that didn't reach his eyes.

“Then I will take my leave,” Chen said. “I can feel the power of this place affecting me more and more by the moment, so I shall withdraw. I recommend the rest of you do the same.”

Chen left, leaving the three vampires and the other essence user. Not trusting the vampires and not liking the odds, the essence user followed Chen.

“We will go,” one of the vampires told Jason. “The day will come when you will pay for your arrogance.”

“It usually does,” Jason admitted sadly.

\*\*\*

Shade’s plane form rode high over the skies of Italy as Jason relaxed. He’d managed to get away from his spirit domain using his portal ability, having scouted out potential portal destinations before arriving at the dome. He’d known going in that he would be surrounding himself with what were, if not enemies, at least unhelpfully avaricious magical factions and would need an exit strategy.

Before leaving, he had made contact with the Slovakian government, which the family of farmers had asked him to deliver them to. He could only assume that anyone else in the dome had died during the transformation, as they were not in the city and could not be found in the astral space. The astral space itself was a mixture of the environments that had been in his territories, but more integrated than the original concentric rings.

Jason sent the family to their government representatives via portal, arranging a future meeting at the same time. Jason had, after all, essentially annexed twenty-six square kilometres of sovereign state. That subsequent meeting had not gone well.

“It’s time, Mr Asano,” Shade said.

Jason grinned, not getting up from the chair he was reclining in.

“This is nice,” he said. “It’ll be good to jump out of a plane when I’m not racing off to fight were-dinosaurs or take out the guys who blew the plane up. I can just enjoy it.”

“Shall we, then?” Shade asked.

“Go for it.”

The plane turned into a cloud of shadow that was absorbed by Jason as he arced through the air. He didn't even break his pose at first, legs cross and arms behind his head. Eventually, he tilted his weight to flip himself over and look at Venice sprawled out below. Eventually, he conjured his cloak and directed himself to where he had left the cloud boat in which Farrah and his family were hidden, landing lightly on the deck. He went inside to an industrial clamp hug from his niece and greetings from the group relieved to see him.



“They’re speculating on the news that someone kidnapped you,” Erika said. “They still don’t know who attacked the meeting with the Slovakian government.”

“It was the government themselves,” Jason said. “When the Network split, the various Governments ended up working with different Network factions or turning to the Cabal or EOA. The Slovaks ended up with Network’s leadership faction.”

“They’re calling themselves the True Network now,” Farrah said.

“Whatever they call themselves,” Jason continued, “they don’t have gold-rankers like China and the US. They’re caught between them and the vampires, looking down the barrel of irrelevance. They thought I could help them tilt the scale. Actually had the nuggets to try and make a deal after I...”

He glanced at Emi sitting on a couch next to him.

“...dealt with their tactical teams.”

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Jason shared a sanitised version of his experiences with his family and then the more thorough version privately with Farrah. With her, he didn't skip over the elements like his death and what Dawn had told him.

“We have decisions to make,” Farrah said. “It would make sense to move your family at Asano village from the village to this spirit domain of yours. With all the complications that would entail, though, that may be trouble.”

“That occurred to me as well, but I don’ think it’s worth it. There are eyes on the village and the spirit domain, and while we can get around them, it would be logistically challenging. There have been family members reporting to the factions from the beginning. What happens when the spirit domain sees them as hostile? Kick them out? Let them in anyway? Plus, who knows how many would want to take that leap. Asano village has been a haven as the world goes mad and I’m sure a lot of them wouldn’t want to leave.”

“All that would be time-consuming to deal with,” Farrah said.

“I didn’t fix the transformation perfectly,” Jason said. “I stopped the end of the world from happening more or less immediately, but the clock is counting down faster than ever. I’d like to move the family but I can’t afford that kind of delay.”

“Magical manifestations have begun happening in the lowest-magic areas,” Farrah said. “It’s mostly just lesser monsters and a few iron-rank ones but people are panicking. The Network factions are tracking them using the grid and there won’t be any more monster waves, but now monsters are just turning up places.”

“So that’s it,” Jason said. “The non-magical world I left is now magical. People are going to start stumbling across essences. Monsters can show up anywhere.”

"It was never really without magic," Farrah pointed out.

"It was to most of us," Jason said.

"The other thing to be aware of is the vampires. They're taking over more and more places, mostly here in Europe and in South America. The US have theirs largely contained and China seems to as well, although it's hard to tell with their media blackout policy. No one is sure what's happening in Russia, but the rumours are that the vampires and the rest of the Cabal have all but gone to war."

"If the vampires and the rest of the Cabal split like the Network did, that's good for team anti-vampire apocalypse," Jason said. "We need to get back to fixing the link between the worlds before the vampires make any large, collective moves."

"Indications are that it's close," Farrah said. "If even the public news knows that, war is probably imminent. What about our plan to raid the blood-enhancement site here in Venice?"

"We'll go ahead with it. That blood and those loose reality cores will be of use to us."

"That leaves the question of how to track nodes, now that we don't have proto-spaces to use."

"That, I think I can manage. My time inside the dome cost me a life, but my understanding of astral forces and how they relate to node space was advanced quite a lot. I may be able to track nodes faster and more reliably than our old methods."

"That's good to hear," Farrah said.

"There's something we need to sort out first, though," Jason said. "I picked up some loot while I was away."

## Chapter 428

### Another Day for Vampires

Jason and Farrah were sitting in a cabin on the cloud boat, going over the gains from Jason's adventures in the transformation zone. The biggest were two items he had looted from the vampirically-transformed gold-ranker, Tran. The first was a bracelet; a simple loop of marbled red and black stone.

---

Item: [Blade of the Blood Queen] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

*A bracelet bestowing a fragment of the power belonging to the Queen of Blood (jewellery, bracelet).*

- Effect: Bladed weapons conjured with iron-rank or lower abilities while wearing this bracelet inflict a health and stamina drain when making attacks. The drain effect is enhanced on vampiric enemies and other enemies that hoard stolen life force. Rather than heal the wearer, the drained life force is stored within the bracelet.
- Effect: Each time a minor threshold of health is cumulatively drained, an instance of [Blood of the Immortal] is bestowed on the wearer. This does not consume the bracelet's stored life force. This effect does not occur if the wearer has no blood.
- Effect: Once the major threshold of health is cumulatively drained, the wearer may consume all life force in the bracelet at any stage to gain [Power of the Blood Queen]. This ability cannot be used if the wearer has no blood.
- [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.
- [Power of the Blood Queen] (boon, unholy): [Power], [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes are massively increased. Damage reduction and resistance to blood effects are enhanced. While this ability is in effect, the drain effect applied to bladed weapons is enhanced and directly drains life force to the bracelet's wearer instead of the bracelet. Life force drained while the wearer is uninjured increases the duration of this effect.

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"It's a bit redundant for me," Jason said. "My blood powers do pretty much the same thing. One of them even gives me the exact same healing effect. The bracelet's Sunday punch is stronger than what I have but you'll get more out of it than I will. If you stack this on top of your existing self-buffs, you can probably take on an ancient vampire solo."

"We'll need to rank it up," Farrah said.

"Like I said, I've got materials stacked up in piles. There were these nice rolling hills with a bunch of trolls. It was all might, growth and blood, in essences, awakening stones

and huge piles of quintessence. I haven't seen so many since I looted a plant the size of a city."

Large quantities of blood quintessence and spirit coins were required to upgrade the growth item, of which Jason had plenty. It was always a relatively accessible form of quintessence and Jason had long been stockpiling it for resummoning Colin if needed.

"If we can get it up to silver-rank it should make a good dent in some vampires," Farrah said.

"That's not the only thing the vampire dropped," Jason said, pulling out an ornate, four-sided glass lamp. "It's not as powerful as the sun crystal I spent to get it, but as compensation goes, it could be worse."

The lamp was framed in silver and gold, with sapphire settings and a diamond in the centre, in place of a flame.

---

Item: [Beacon of the Day] (gold rank, rare)

*Mana lamp variant that extends its coverage by enhancing only a specific aspect of magic density (tool, lamp).*

- **Effect:** When inactive, the lamp accumulates and stores ambient magic. Rate of accumulation is dependent on the magical density of the local area.
- **Effect:** When active, the lamp enhances the magical density of sunlight in a wide area. The lamp does not generate sunlight itself. This has no other effects on local magical density.

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"This is potentially a huge boon for us," Farrah said. "Only the weakest vampires will be affected by sunlight in most places on Earth. That will affect the iron-rank ones, and the bronze to a lesser degree. This lamp, though, could turn the tides against any vampire who thinks it doesn't need to fear the day."

"The best part is that it's not an item we need to carry, so we can use it without getting magical backlash for not being gold rank ourselves. How much effect will it have on vampires?"

"Depends on the vampire," Farrah said. "A gold-rank vampire will drop down to the level of a mid-to-high silver in terms of attributes. Maybe even a low-rank silver, depending on the vampire and how strong the lamp is. They'll probably lose access to their bloodline powers as well, at least the more extravagant ones. Weaker vampires will be hit even harder, with iron-rank vamps being reduced to normal human levels and bronze not doing much better."

"The lower rank ones were never that much of a concern anyway," Jason said.

“Don’t be so quick to dismiss them,” Farrah said. “While you’ve been off saving the planets, I’ve been looking into how the vampires are operating in cities they’ve taken over like this one.”

“You have been careful, right?”

“You’ve died so many more times than me,” Farrah pointed out. “I may not have the stealth powers you do, but I’ve been an adventurer for almost a decade. I know my profession.”

Jason held up his hands in surrender.

“I don’t doubt it. What did you find?”

"I centred my attention on the blood treatment facility we found. In the two weeks you've been gone there's been a big uptick in activity, specifically around lower-rank vampires. I've seen a lot of them going in and their aura are noticeably stronger when they come out. Also, their auras are less stable, more feral. What you'd expect from vampires in my world."

“You think they’ve found a way to accelerate vampire advancement at the cost of self-control? Make the Cabal’s vampires into a more powerful army?”

“I think it’s worse than that,” Farrah said. “Almost all the vampires I’ve been seeing are fresh. I think they’re turning the populace and then trying to ramp up their power at the cost of them devolving into ghouls.”

“Like the ones we saw at the Network headquarters in Sydney,” Jason said, horrified realisation crossing his face. “They want to do that to the entire city?”

“The ones still alive.”

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Jason woke up in a cold sweat. He didn’t even think he could sweat anymore, his nightmares clearly having a disruptive effect on his equilibrium. His dreams had been plagued with images of the victims of Makassar, risen from the dead, blended his visions of Venice and other cities, overrun with unliving monsters.

As his cloud bed wicked away the sweat, Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“Mr Asano, Miss Hurin and your sister are at your door.”

“Why?” Jason asked groggily. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“Your ill-resting slumber had an unfortunate effect on your aura, Mr Asano. Your control over it was uncharacteristically loose.”

Jason sat bolt upright.

“Did I hurt anyone?”

"No, Mr Asano. You have learned Miss Hurin's lessons well and the projection was not harmful. Miss Hurin and I have concluded that the local vampires have likely become aware of our presence in the city, however."

Jason stood up and blood oozed from the pores of his skins, transforming into his blood robes as he moved to the door and opened it.

"Jason," Erika said immediately. "You scared the hell out of Emi, what did you..."

She trailed off as he turned to look at her and she found herself facing the inhuman orbs of his eyes, swirling with gold, silver and blue energy. Jason turned to Farrah.

"We need to move," Jason said and Farrah nodded.

"I'll help Erika gather the others up," Farrah said. "Pick an evacuation point and open a portal. I don't think your spirit vault will be very welcoming right now."

As with the transformation zone, Jason had scouted out several potential portal destinations before arriving in Venice. The vampire-controlled city was always potentially dangerous.

"I'll have you take them," Jason said. "I'm going to scout out this ghoul-conversion operation and record it. We can pass it along to the magical factions so they know what's happening."

"Then we do it together," Farrah said. "I've confirmed that there are two gold-rank vampires in this city and it'll take days to charge up the mana lamp, even with the vortex accumulator on the cloud boat sucking in magic to feed it. Even after we took my new bracelet up to silver-rank yesterday, if they find us it will be life and death."

Jason opened his mouth to protest, then stopped. He used a meditative technique to calm his mind and disperse the rat's nest of panic, rage, fear and disorder in his mind. Erika looked at him quizzically as he stood there, eyes closed and not moving. She looked at Farrah, who motioned her not to say anything. Finally, Jason opened his eyes again.

"Dawn isn't here to tell me not to do something stupid," he said. "I have you, Farrah, but you'll just help me do it better. We need to be our own voices of caution, now."

"Meaning?" Farrah asked.

"There will be another day for vampires, and moving forward from the back foot isn't smart. We all get out of here together."

\*\*\*

Jason sent his family through a portal and started absorbing the cloud boat back into the flask. As that was happening, a silver-rank vampire arrived to investigate the aura burst it had sensed, with a trio of bronze-rank vampires in tow. None escaped to report and Jason left through the portal.

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After relocating to Morocco, Jason sent word to all the factions of what the vampires were doing. Africa itself was largely vampire-free but it was also a stronghold for other elements of the Cabal, so Jason and Farrah didn't let their guards down.

Jason was unhappy, their location a reminder of his last visit. His family had come to meet him after his world-spanning trip and they enjoyed a normal holiday together. It was not too long before the grid went down, making them the last days of planet Earth's old normal.

Jason gave his family space as they were growing increasingly distant. His strange eyes and savage aura burst had made them understand he was no longer human more effectively than telling them over and over ever had.

Emi's skittishness around him was like a knife to the heart. She had only ever experienced the benevolent aspect of his aura until his nightmare flashed the aggressive side of it. She hadn't been harmed but she was deeply affected.

Jason had set up the cloud palace in the form of a sprawling but abandoned desert compound, far from anywhere. It gave his family all the space they needed. In the meantime, he worked on what would have to be his new methodology for finding the right nodes to repair.

He started by absorbing the item Dawn had given him, that looked like a model bridge in a bottle.

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Item: [Firmament Bridge] (transcendent rank, legendary)

???. (???, ???).

➤ Effect: ???.

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Before absorbing it, he examined it with every tool of astral magic knowledge at his disposal, which was quite a lot at his current stage. Between Dawn's tutoring, the books from the goddess of Knowledge, covered in Clive's insightful notes and his increasingly intrinsic understanding of astral forces, those tools were quite formidable.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Dawn. It was that he knew that she didn't tell him everything and the entity she served was an unknowable enigma. She was also likely to do what she felt was in his best interests, over what he might choose for himself.

Nothing he could detect told him anything was wrong with the item. In fact, under the scrutiny of his examination, the information window for it went from a bundle of question marks to a full reveal.

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Item: [Firmament Bridge] (transcendent rank, legendary)

*An item designed to establish reality bridges across the astral, connecting worlds. (crafting material, manifest ephemera).*

- Effect: Used in the creation of specific astral constructs.
- Your soul's absorption of the [Fundament Gate], your gestalt physical/spiritual nature and your [Spirit Domain] ability allow you to incorporate this item into your spirit vault. Doing so will purge the World-Phoenix's influence and the item's base effect, instead, altering your abilities.
- This item's impact on your abilities will be diminished due to your rank being lower than that of the item. The effect will further increase as your rank increases.
- Once incorporated, this object cannot be removed or made use of by anyone else. Incorporating this item into your spirit vault will affect the following abilities:
- [Dark Rider]: Your familiar will be able to take the form of an astral vessel. Prior to reaching diamond rank, this vessel will not have any means of self-propulsion and can only follow astral channels.
- [Path of Shadows]: The maximum distance of your teleportation effects is increased and your teleportation effects are harder to interfere with. You can manipulate node space to anchor an astral bridge between two worlds. This ability effect can be used a single time and requires anchors to be established in the node space of each world individually. Once the bridge is established, it will slowly transmute from an astral channel to a permanent material bridge. This bridge will have a stabilising and restorative effect on the dimensional membrane of both worlds.
- [Hegemon]: Once the ability to create a bridge has been used, the power driving that effect will transmute, enhancing your ability to sense, manipulate and attack objects and individuals related to the Builder using your aura.

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In his cloud palace, Jason absorbed the item as Farrah stood by. He felt its connection to the power of the magic door he had absorbed, felt it become part of him. His understanding of the astral took another firm step forward.

"How is it?" Farrah asked.

Jason opened a portal. Instead of the usual darkness, it had the same transcendent light as his eyes.

"It feels good."



## Chapter 429

### Less Freud and More God of Healing

Jason emerged from a node space portal, satisfied with the results. He opened a regular portal and returned to the cloud palace, still masquerading as desert ruins.

“How was it?” Farrah asked as they sat down, looking out over the desert.

“I’m pretty sure it’s going to work,” Jason said. “Rather than unreliably triangulating locations in node space through proto-spaces, doing it directly through node space is going to work much better. We could have saved ourselves months if I had understood enough to make that work.”

“Even Dawn didn’t have that kind of knowledge,” Farrah pointed out. “At this point, you probably understand the underlying makeup of physical realities better than anyone who isn’t a servant of the Builder.”

“It’s a big cosmos,” Jason said. “For all we know, there are people like us dealing with the same problems in thousands of other universes. It feels like the great astral beings are focused on us, but we’re probably just grains of sand on the beach they’re walking along. Who knows how many places they’re playing off against one another?”

“That’s a little depressing,” Farrah said. “That we’re so irrelevant in the scale of the cosmos.”

“I kind of like it,” Jason said, casting his gaze over the empty blue sky. “It means that all that really matters is what we decide matters to us. We can let all the petty crap fall away.”

“Letting the petty crap fall away isn’t traditionally your strong suit,” Farrah pointed out. Jason flashed a grin.

“Maybe it should be,” he said. “Speaking of petty crap, what did you do with that vampire we caught before I went off to Slovakia?”

“Well, we beat the crap out of him, so he quite desperately needed to feed. But he eats people and we didn’t feed him any. Also, he would have needed blood enhanced by reality core energy anyway. He died, so I weighted him down and dropped him in the ocean.”

“After I’ve knocked the kinks out of this new node-tracking methodology, we should take another run at some vampires. Maybe even go back to Venice, record everything. Did you contact the Network about what the vampires are doing?”

“Yeah, I sent word to Anna back in Australia. She’s passing it on to the other factions but she asked if we could get some solid evidence. There’s not a lot of trust going around,

so it'll take a push to get the other factions to ally against the vampires. She agrees that it would be best if that push isn't the populations of Europe and South America being turned into undead monsters."

"Our concern is getting access to reality cores and maybe that blood. Draining a vampire to increase my abilities isn't a bad idea, but if I can use that energy to accelerate my work, that's even better."

Jason had a decent collection of the depleted unstable genesis cores, which had been transformed into genesis reclamation cores.

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

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

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

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Jason still didn't know what the regenesis core would do, but he had hopes that it would help him repair the link between worlds. Another possibility was that they could be used to replace reality cores that had been plucked out of transformation zones, rectifying some of the damage.

Transformation zones were already the sites of the highest magical levels on Earth. On most of the planet, the increased magical density had stabilised at a point lower than even Greenstone in the other world. The monster manifestations were lesser or iron rank, with the very occasional bronze. Transformation zones were turning into hotspots of heightened magical density, with mostly bronze but also silver-rank manifestations. There were even transformation zones where the magical density had yet to settle into its peak, leading to concerns of gold-rank manifestations.

The one good thing about the changes to the world's ambient magic was that the vampires had become wary of transformation zones. The Cabal had largely taken over those zones, once the fighting over the reality cores was done, but heightened magic meant that the sunlight there had become increasingly harmful to vampires. They were forced to relocate into lower-magic zones.

"How are the others?" Jason asked. He was continuing to give his family space after spooking them.

"They've been discussing potentially going back to Asano Village."

Jason nodded, sadly.

“They don’t trust me anymore.”

“It’s not that they don’t trust you,” Farrah said. “They just don’t understand what you’re going through and how that’s affecting your behaviour.”

“I’m not entirely sure that I do,” Jason said.

“There’s a transition that happens somewhere around silver and gold rank as your perspective undergoes a fundamental shift. You can feel yourself becoming more a part of the magic that permeates the world. Your power reaches heights that make you a living force of authority. You start thinking more like someone who is going to live for centuries, rather than decades. At least, some do. From what I’ve seen, those in your world don’t go through this. Not as early, at least. I think it’s because they’re weak, and it’s usually the strong who go through it at silver.”

“It’s psychological,” Jason said. “It makes sense that different cultures go through different versions of what you’re describing.”

“In my world, they call it the immortal mindset.”

“It doesn’t feel like I’m thinking as an immortal,” Jason said. “It feels like I’m still making the same impulse decisions that have cost me in the past.”

“You could have maybe been less antagonistic with the Builder guy who killed you. Then maybe he wouldn’t have.”

“The Builder sabotaged both our worlds, Farrah. You expect me to play nice?”

“To stop yourself from getting killed by diamond-rankers, yes. And don’t expect me to believe that his role in messing up the world is enough to act the way you did.”

“You don’t know how I acted.”

“Yeah, Jason. I do.”

He nodded his acknowledgement, remaining silent for a moment.

“He tried to take my soul,” he whispered. “I don’t remember it, but I feel it. A power so vast there isn’t a word that encapsulates the magnitude of it. Shivering like I was naked in a storm, knowing nothing except that if I gave in, I lost everything.”

He touched the scar on his chin that cut a line through his neatly-trimmed beard.

“I won’t ever take a step back from the Builder. I can’t. Standing against it is engraved on my soul as much as the scars that fight left behind.”

Farrah stared at him without saying anything.

“What?” he asked.

“I need more women friends,” she said grumpily, getting to her feet. “Men are willing to melodrama themselves to death.”

Jason watched her leave.

“Was that melodramatic?” Jason asked.

“I thought it was fine,” Shade said.

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Erika left Emi playing a board game with her father, part of the extensive collection Greg had bequeathed them following his death. She took a walk, in and out of the buildings, taking in the strange dichotomy of the cloud palace. The outdoor areas were every part of the abandoned buildings of faded stone, seemingly having been there for decades, if not centuries. Inside were the soft textures and fairy tale colours of the magical building made of clouds.

The building was a reflection of the bizarre life she and her family now lived. They were hiding in ruins in Africa and before that was a superyacht in Venice and before that, her brother’s own soul. The world had transformed in the last couple of years and timing with Jason’s return stuck in her mind, even if she knew it wasn’t fair.

She had no doubts that Jason did his best for them, keeping them safe even as much of the world fell into misery, death and despair. That didn’t make their situation easy, though. As days, weeks and months passed, it felt increasingly like they were watching the end times via internet news sites.

“I told you,” Jason said from right behind her and she started.

“I’m going to put a bell on you, sneaking up on people like you’re bloody Batman,” she said, turning around to face him.

“I kind of am Batman,” he said.

“You’re Punisher if he were the Sorcerer Supreme at best. Also, kind of a dick.”

“Hurtful.”

“What did you tell me?” she asked.

“That you would reconsider going to the other world.”

“Have you been having Shade eavesdrop on us?”

“Yes, but he only says anything if there’s a threat. Farrah told me.”

Erika bowed her head.

“We don’t want to seem ungrateful, Jason. It seemed like an adventure, back then. Now the world feels like its collapsing around us.”

“It is.”

She raised her head to meet Jason’s gaze.

“I look at you and I don’t see my brother in your eyes anymore.”

“It’s a superficial change, Eri.”

"I know. But you know that the eyes are a huge part of how we read people, and now you read as alien. I think you're underestimating how unnerving those eyes are. You look like you're just a vessel filled with magical stuff."

"I am."

"You aren't making this any easier."

"I'm not apologising for who or what I am, Eri. It's up to you to decide whether to accept it or not."

"Jason, it's not like that."

"It's alright, Eri. I live a strange life and I have to be strange to live it. You can love me and still not want to be part of that."

"No, Jason. We're not trying to push you away. I'm not Mum. We just need some time to come to grips with things. For all the things you have to face, you're going out there and facing them. You at least get to act, to take your fate into your own hands. We're left hiding away, waiting for one storm after another to pass."

She leaned forward, resting her forehead on his chest.

"We're not going anywhere," she said. "We were just scared and talking. We don't want to go back to Australia and we still want to go with you. At this point, is it any more dangerous than here?"

Jason wrapped an arm around his sister.

"Sure," he said. "But standing next to me might not be as bad there as it is here."

"You got taller again," she said, pulling him into a hug and resting her cheek against his shoulder.

"That was ages ago, when I ranked up. If you hugged your little brother more, you'd have already noticed. How's Emi doing?"

"She's scared and confused, Jason. I know she seems more mature than either of us, sometimes, but she's barely a teenager. For some bizarre reason, she's always looked up to you and you're not just Uncle Jason anymore. She sees things. On the news. We all do, and a lot of it is not flattering."

"I was never a good role model, even before propaganda started flinging back and forth."

"No, you were rubbish."

"You didn't have to agree quite so emphatically."

"Jason, she's still figuring who she is and who she's going to be. You're a big part of that, and it's not just the news that's unnerving her. The changes she sees in you are

throwing her off much more than the rest of us and, to be honest Jason, we're all a little worried. I don't suppose you know a good therapist in the other world?"

Jason laughed.

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"Seriously?"

"You saw her in my recordings. My friend Rufus' Mum. Ask Farrah; she'll tell you. She probably really can help Emi adjust over there. She helped me in that dark period you saw in the recordings after my first run-in with the Builder."

"They actually have therapists?"

"They're less Freud and more god of healing, but yeah."

Erika let him go.

"So, what next?" she asked.

"The end is closer than I thought," Jason said. "I can do what I need to do faster than before and I don't think I'll be here to see the vampire war through."

"How are we having a serious conversation that includes the phrase vampire war?" she asked and Jason laughed.

"Strange days," Jason said casually. "That's the Earth's fight, not mine, but I'll do my part before I go. Infiltrate a vampire monster factory; maybe stop them from turning someplace into a wasteland of the dead. I've seen enough of those. If I can show off what they're trying to do, maybe people will stop fighting each other and see the threat that faces us all."

"That's not historically a strong bet for the human race," Farrah said.

"No, but I'll do what I can, steal some magic universe rocks while I'm at it and save the world. Again."

"Did you really save the world?"

"I really did," he said with a weary smile. "You know, when Dawn first told me I had to save the world, I thought it would be this awesome adventure."

"But it wasn't?"

He flashed a grin.

"Are you kidding? I was shooting werewolves and trolls with a steampunk minigun. It was the most awesomest thing that ever happened."

## Chapter 430

### Little Cost in Exploring

Jason's spirit domain was a small city in western Slovakia. In the month since the dome around it came down, several gold-rankers had been exploring it, going in and searching, only to leave when the hostile effects applied to intruders grew dangerous. They would break into houses, smash their way into the pagoda and even dig up the ground in search of buried secrets.

The buildings, being made of mutable cloud-stuff, would restore themselves promptly, but the streets and parks were left looking like they had been subjected to a bombing campaign. After arriving in the pagoda via portal, Jason took a look from the top floor balcony and was unhappy with what he saw. Erika and Farrah were with him while the rest of the family trailed behind Emi as she rushed off to explore.

"I knew it would happen," Jason said looking out at the destruction. "Doesn't mean I like it."

"It's like something from a Disney movie," Erika said. "Except someone blew it up. Are those all cloud houses?"

"Yep," Jason said. "It's why they're still intact, or they'd look as bombed out as everything else. What did they think? That I buried a bunch of reality cores like pirate treasure?"

"That's exactly what they thought," Farrah said. "Are they still coming to look around?"

"No," Jason said. He was always able to sense people within his spirit domain, even from across the world. "They tried to ransack the place but didn't find anything. After that, they started taking stuff, from the footpath tiles to whole trees, to magically examine. Cloud-stuff from the houses, too, but that just dissolves on them. You can see their camps set up, just outside the town limits, but they're silver-rankers at most. The EOA and the Cabal have buggered off entirely."

"They wouldn't be able to keep any real number of gold-rankers occupied on fruitless searching," Farrah said. "The proto-spaces may have stopped but the transformation zones are still appearing."

"What about vampires?" Erika asked.

"The magic here is too strong," Jason said. "They could only come at night, and with the attention on this place, operating here is a risk. Slovakia isn't one of their strongholds; it's one of the few places in Europe where the Network continues to hold sway."

Europe was increasingly being overtaken by vampire rule, with much of the continent's broadcast media having gone dark. The information coming out online was mostly from private individuals, depicting the formation of a bloody dystopia. The world had become aware that the vampires were up to something, but how many believed the warnings they had spread through the Network, Jason and Farrah were uncertain of.

Jason had been refining his methodology of identifying nodes for repair while Farrah collated information being released online to choose an appropriate target for infiltration and exposure. They dismissed Venice, worried that their earlier presence would have left the vampires there on higher alert. While they were at work on this, they were contacted and asked for a meeting.

Jason and Farrah's old contacts in the Australian Network branches were now operating under the Global Defence Network moniker, incorporating disgruntled members of the Network, the EOA and the Cabal together. Annabeth Tilden had been asked to be a go-between to arrange a meeting and reached out to Farrah. Jason's spirit domain was selected for a location to make Jason and Farrah feel secure enough to agree.

"They won't arrive until after dark," Jason said. "Let's grab the others and take a tour."

"I would have like to see it in its original state," Erika said sadly.

"It's fine," Jason said. "This is just the outer area. They can't touch the true domain."

"The astral space," Farrah said.

"Shall we take a look?"

They rode the elevating platform down to the mezzanine level, which was an open space overlooking the atrium. It was a garden and lounge area with couches and planters centred around a water feature. A channel of water emerged from the wall, bisecting the room and spilling off the edge, into the atrium pool below. The two halves of the room were connected by a pair of small bridges that crossed the channel.

Lining the walls were ten inactive portal arches. Above each archway was a map, floating in the air like a hologram. They depicted a city laid out like a spoked wheel, with a different point marked on each portal's map.

Jason moved to the archway where the very centre of the map was highlighted and with a wave of his arm, the portal filled with gold, silver and blue energy. They all made their way through the portal to emerge into a room that was identical except for only having one portal. Jason led them to an elevating platform that carried them to the top floor.

"This is the astral space?" Farrah said. "It seems almost identical to where we left."

"The arrival pagoda is the same," Jason said. "You'll see the differences in a moment."



As with the original pagoda, the top floor was a private residence. Jason guided them out to the balcony, where they could see into the surrounding areas. An industrial city of brass, steel and a strange but beautiful blue metal, it had neatly cobbled streets and towering buildings. Unlike Jason's cloud house town where the pagoda loomed over everything, the pagoda here was dwarfed by buildings that turned the street below into a canyon.

After leaving the others to crowd the balustrade and gawk, Jason prompted Shade. Darkness came pouring out of Jason's shadow to form a large cloud, floating over the balcony. As it coalesced, Jason gestured at the balustrade, which sank into the floor. The dark cloud took the form of a dirigible, docked at the balcony.

"Uh, Jason," Erika said, looking up at the vehicle.

"Pretty sweet, yeah?" he said.

"Totally," Emi said, rushing in through the open door.

Jason had been turning on all the cool uncle taps in the last few weeks. It hadn't restored their previous closeness, but she was, at least, less ill at ease around him

"Good job, Shade," Jason said.

"Thank you, Mr Asano," Shade's voice came from Jason's shadow.

"Jason," Erika said. "You realise that floating around in a giant black zeppelin is proper bad guy behaviour, right?"

"It's fine," Jason said.

"I mean, proper villainous," Erika insisted.

"It's a delightful passenger craft on which to spend a carefree afternoon with my family."

"It's practically a volcano lair. Next, you'll be building a space station in the shape of your own head."

"Huh," Jason said thoughtfully. "Shade, do you have enough bodies to swing something like that?"

"No."

"I can't wait for gold-rank. I need to start eating vampires."

"What?" Erika asked.

"I mean training super hard."

Erika shook her head as she made her way aboard, mumbling.

"Giant black zeppelin, bloody hell..."

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The interior of the dirigible was akin to a luxury passenger train built entirely from black materials. Emi and Erika started referring to it as the Bat-Zeppelin. From the observation windows, they were able to look out at the astral space as the dirigible rose into the sky.

As the map had depicted, the city looked like a wagon wheel from the sky. In the centre was the main city, a solid circle of steel and brass towers. From there, long strips of urbanised area extended out in all directions through forested and pastoral land until they reached a circle of city that ringed the forest, the low, grassy hills and the city at the centre of it all. Then the spokes continued outwards until they reached a final circle of urbanised area that enclosed all of the rest.

Outside of the city centre, the buildings were not so large and were more residential, based on the look of them. They maintained the semi-industrial, steampunk feel of the central city, while also incorporating things like parks and gardens.

The spokes and rings of the city created large but enclosed pockets of woodlands and pastoral ideal. Everywhere the city bordered a non-urbanised area, fifteen-metre walls of brick and metal protected the city. Placed along the top of the walls were automated turrets with rotary guns similar to the minigun Jason had used in the transformation zone. These shot conjured bullets rather than unstable reality creation energy.

“Look, there’s cottages,” Emi pointed out as they flew over one of the pastoral zones. “They look adorable.”

“Treehouses, too, but they’re tricky to spot,” Jason said. “I’ll show you later. These areas are subject to monster manifestations, though, so only powerful essence users could live out there.”

The general design of the city, viewed from the air, was similar to a spoked wheel. Beyond the outer ring that was the edge of the city was more wilderness. Wild forest and windswept highlands extended off to the horizon.

“How big is it?” Erika marvelled.

“Astral spaces go a bit funny around the edges, especially the big ones,” Farrah said. “The concept of space becomes a bit wonky.”

Even Jason couldn’t be certain of the astral space’s extent. Beyond a certain point, astral forces intruded and made reality an uncertain place to be. His mind drifted to the giant, alien shapes he had seen in the distant regions of the transformation zone. He couldn’t help but wonder if they were still out there, hiding in the distant reaches of the astral space.

“There’s about seven hundred kilometres in each direction from the city you’d be fine to roam around in before things started getting weird,” Jason said. “So long as you don’t mind the chance of bumping into monsters. The central city is about eighteen kilometres across, while the outer ring is about a hundred and sixty kilometres.”

“There are monsters here?” Emi asked.

“Just one little pack of bronze ranks, thus far,” Jason said, and then pointed. “They’re over that way.”

“You know where they are?” Erika asked.

“This is my domain,” Jason said. “Until you reach the outskirts Farrah just mentioned, nothing can hide from me here. Also, inside the city is safe. Shade, take us down for a closer look at the walls.”

“Those guns are the kind of things the gold-rankers were looking for,” Farrah said.

“Yep, but they’re not getting into the astral space. The apertures – the archways in the pagoda – are sealed unless I open them. A seal can be cracked, given enough time, but time is something you don’t get when your flesh is…”

He glanced at Emi.

“...just fine but you feel compelled to leave for undisclosed reasons.”

“They probably tried, though, right?” Farrah asked. “Breaking in?”

“Oh, yeah, but the portals are part of the pagoda, which is a cloud construct. Every time they tried to set out ritual materials to break in, the building absorbed them and stashed them in the vault. They smashed their way in and took them back, but it was still pretty funny.”

“The building can act on its own like that?” Farrah asked.

“No, I had to control it.”

“From Africa?” Erika asked.

“This is my domain,” Jason said. “I could control it from Mars.”

The dirigible had dropped low, close to the walls.

“Are those train tracks running along the top of the wall?” Emi asked.

“Good eye, young miss,” Jason said. “There’s a train system that runs through the city and around the inner and outer rings, connecting everything. There’s another track that runs inside the wall, so trains can pass one another by. It’s pretty cool.”

“And there are no people in this place at all?” Yumi asked.

Jason’s Grandmother now looked as young as Jason himself after recently monster-coring her way to bronze rank. She was the opposite of Jason, rarely speaking but always watching and listening. When she did talk, people listened.

“I considered moving the family here,” Jason said. “They would be safer once they were.”

“Impractical,” Yumi said. “Getting them here would be one thing, but hardly the biggest hurdle. You said that anyone with hostile intent would encounter the defences of the town outside, did you not?”

“I did,” Jason said.

“There are members of the family who do not like what has happened to it since magic was revealed. People not given essences who feel entitled to them. People who claim the village itself was a bad idea and that we should have gone to Sydney, yet will not leave the village themselves. People who are spying on their own family for outsiders.”

Yumi glanced at Emi, then back at Jason.

“People who think you are an inhuman monster.”

Jason resisted the urge to point out that he wasn't human and his body was, essentially, that of a monster.

“Every family has its petty and ungracious members,” Yumi continued. “Ignoring them at a barbecue is one thing, but bringing them here is another, even if you can spare them from the attacks this place would levy on them. Then there's the fact that they would be in this huge, empty city all alone.”

Shade returned them to the pagoda and Jason led them to an underground train station beneath it. Shade served as train operator, leading it through tunnels and along walls and elevated tracks. Being inside the city made the eerie emptiness of it unnervingly clear.

“How many people could live here?” Emi asked.

“Not sure,” Jason said. “I'd have to survey all the residences.”

“It seems sad to just leave it empty like this,” Emi said.

“If you know a large, friendly population, let me know,” Jason joked.

“What about the transformed people?” Emi suggested.

“The people caught in the transformation zones?” Jason asked.

“Yeah,” Emi said. “They were all turned into elves and goblins and fairies, so why not let them live in a magic city?”

“They've been getting a rough shake,” Erika said. “Rounded up into camps, forcibly recruited by different magical factions.”

“Ah, crap,” Jason said. “The Network taking them on was something I suggested.”

“At least those people are getting essences and some power, even if they’re under heavy restrictions,” Erika said. “The rumours coming out of Russia and China are bad, and plenty of other places are confirmed as being just as harsh.”

“I was hoping that wouldn’t happen,” Jason said. “Of course, I always thought it would.”

“That kind of thing isn’t practical, Sweetie,” Erika told her daughter.

“Why not?” Emi asked. “Uncle Jason could make a big announcement that any of them who want to come can come. Any of them looking to cause trouble would get turned back. He could make it seem like anyone who didn’t let them go were being tyrants, which they are. It wouldn’t work everywhere, but in some places, it would.”

“It’s not an idea without merit,” Emi’s father, Ian, said.

“And if the nations of the world think that Jason is attempting to build a magical army?” Yumi asked. “It could just heighten the oppression those poor people are under.”

“Just give them something,” Emi said. “They’re all after uncle Jason for one thing or another. Why not just give them something they want in return for a bunch of people they don’t?”

“I don’t hate the idea,” Jason said. “There are complications, though. It would take lengthy negotiations, hammering out deals.”

“It doesn’t have to be you,” Erika pointed out. “Craig Vermillion has been dealing with magical politics longer than Grandmother has been alive. Get some people you trust to hold discussions while you go off saving the world.”

Jason turned to his grandmother.

“What do you think?”

“There is little cost in exploring the idea,” she said. “A practical solution will not come quickly or easily, however. Your involvement will need to be minimal.”

“Providing the venue and shiny trinkets to sell the natives.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll think about it,” Jason said. “Shade, turn us around. It’s time we got back for our meeting.”